

January 18, 2016

In preparation for Monday night's Board of Trustees meeting we spent some time reviewing the 2014/2015 student achievement data that will be presented as part of a TEA requirement. When comparing the data to the State and Region 15, we can easily see that our District has room to grow. However, a closer look at the data will also indicate that over the last year our District significantly closed the gap to the State and Region 15, especially at the elementary level. In the simplest of words, we are absolutely headed in the right direction. If we are to continue moving forward and in the right direction, we must continually work towards improvement in targeted areas.

Two years ago we undertook an effort to improve our curriculum documents and further increase the collaboration between our teachers. I am pleased to report that improvement in these areas resulted in increased student achievement and better ratings from the State. Because these improvements were not due to "gimmicks" or "cramming sessions", I am confident that we have created a solid base from which to continue to grow. As I stated before, if we are to continue to grow, then we must continue to work on improving our process. This year, in the spirit of change and growth, we added our bilingual academies, implemented sheltered instruction for ESL students and improved our special education inclusion practices. Although some may say this is an excessive amount of change, we are mindful that this is still not enough and a continuous study of what works and what needs improvement has to be constant.

For the upcoming year, I am hopeful to implement two improvements to our school system. The first is the electronic curriculum repository, SchoolNet, which will house all of our documents and teaching resources. The second improvement is a block schedule for our secondary students. In a block schedule, our students will continue to have eight instructional periods, but instead of attending all eight every day, they will attend four classes each day for an extended period of time. I want to spend some time describing three significant areas where block scheduling can help our secondary students. First, the most precious resource we have is time, and we hear teachers say there is not enough time to teach concepts sometimes without having to rush on to the next. Looking at this more specifically, "time on task" for our students is critical. By increasing the length of the class period, our teachers will be able to engage our students with the curriculum in a deeper more meaningful way without being cut short on time. We recognize that this will involve staff development for our teachers, but we are prepared to deploy an aggressive staff development plan beginning in April.

A second benefit provided in block scheduling includes the opportunity for more students to develop meaningful academic relationships with our teachers as they engage in conversations with each other about the expected learning. We know through observation and research that students learn more when they actively participate in discussions about the material rather than just "sit and get" information. Here again, we recognize that our teachers will require staff development in questioning techniques that help elicit academic conversations with our students.

A third benefit provided in block scheduling, and probably the most important, is adequate time for our teachers to check for understanding and provide additional support for all learners. For example, consider students who are writing an essay (in any subject) and need additional coaching on the development of their thesis statement and then the expansion of their ideas. Ninety minutes provides the necessary time to expand upon the learning without interruption. In the coming weeks we will finalize all our block scheduling presentations to teachers and parents, conduct a survey of secondary teachers, and have one last round table discussion with a committee of parents, teachers, and students. A decision should be reached by early March.

Although the weeks following the winter break have been filled with administrative duties, I have thoroughly enjoyed the few moments I have been able to spend with students. Early last week I was able to tour [Lonnie Greene Elementary](#) with Principal Cindy Salas. As we walked the halls we saw some students attending to their [six weeks assessments](#) while others were working on science projects. I especially enjoyed having [Chiara](#) explain the behavior management plan our students have become accustomed to.

I always enjoy my conversations with the [Superintendent's Student Advisory](#) Council. This fine group of students always is always able to share an insightful perspective and ask important questions that might otherwise not be thought of. This month's meeting was especially nice because [Wolfgang](#) was able to share with the group how he achieved the Boy's Scouts highest honor- Eagle Scout. Congratulations Wolfgang! The highlight of my week was visiting the [choir room](#) at Del Rio High School where I was able to congratulate [Miranda](#) Martinez for earning a spot in the Texas All Woman's State Choir. It is exciting to know that out of the thousands students that participate in choir, one of the top 10 female vocalists in the entire state of Texas is a child to one of our parents, a learner in our classrooms, and a friend to our [students](#). Congratulations Miranda!

*"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." — Martin Luther King, Jr.*