

A new approach for Arlington Schools

By Jeff Thielman

What's new in the Arlington Public Schools?

This year, the School Committee plans to do things a little differently. Rather than simply receive occasional reports on student achievement from the Superintendent or his assistant, we plan to invite principals and department heads to the School Committee room to discuss what's working and not working at their schools. We want school leaders to tell us about accomplishments and challenges so that improvements can be made in teaching and learning. More of our meeting time will be spent reviewing and discussing student achievement data, getting updates on professional development plans and activities, and hearing directly from educators working with our students.

Our new Superintendent, Nate Levenson, is charged with developing five clear, measurable goals for the district relating to student achievement. Mr. Levenson is meeting with principals, department heads, parents and community members to develop goals for the committee's approval at the first meeting in November. For the remainder of the year, the School Committee will assess the progress the district is making on the new Superintendent's goals.

We are also looking at some low-cost ways to reconfigure our meeting room so it is more conducive to collegial discussions with educators about student learning. We hope the approach we take to running School Committee meetings can be a model for the entire state.

Standards-based learning

The School Committee will be guided by the district's focus on standards-based learning. At my first meeting as School Committee Chairman, I gave each committee member a book by Douglas B. Reeves entitled "101 Questions & Answers about Standards, Assessment and Accountability." In May, most of the committee attended a seminar Reeves held to learn more about the standards movement.

So, what is the standards movement all about? In the past ten years, every state in the nation has adopted formal standards for K-12 education. As my wife asked me while I was drafting this article, "Does that mean we didn't have any standards before?"

Of course we did! But standards advocates point out that well-defined, well-written and highly visible standards in each classroom tell parents, students and teachers what children are expected to learn at each grade level. Expectations do not vary from school to school, exemplary work is on display in each classroom, and students and teachers can explain what proficient work means for each assignment. Parents should not only know the expectations for their children in their current class, but for the year to come. As Professor Reeves says in his book, students are more likely to succeed because they know the "rules of the game."

Does that mean we are stamping out creativity in the learning process? Far from it. Standards create a framework but do not dictate how teachers teach or how students learn. In fact, teaching creatively and responding to diverse learning styles is essential to helping meet the standards. Teachers have the flexibility to vary the length of any curriculum area to ensure that students receive the time they need to learn, and teachers will determine the best use of classroom time to ensure children achieve the standards.

Children's performance is compared against a standard, rather than to other children's work. If the student does not meet the standard, the student has to be given other opportunities to become proficient. Simply beating other kids in tests and quizzes is not enough. Grading on a "curve" is not allowed in a standards-based classroom.

The standards movement demands multiple assessments of student work, and regular feedback following each assignment. A test such as the MCAS examination cannot be the sole evaluation tool of what our students know, though it does provide a limited snapshot of student knowledge. A flaw in the MCAS system is that districts receive scores several months after the test is taken, too late to help them modify what or how they teach the students who took the test.

The standards movement is not entirely new to the Arlington Public Schools. Many of our teachers are already using the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, regarded as one of the best in the country, to guide their work, and most of our new teachers graduate from schools of education where standards-based learning is taught and understood.

But it's new and exciting that our Superintendent and his staff will work hard in the next few years to create a standards-based culture in every classroom in the district. Mr. Levenson and his team will offer professional development for faculty about standards. They will reconfigure teaching schedules so that educators have common planning time to explore creative ways of responding to the diverse learning needs in their classrooms.

The change in our district will not occur overnight or even in the new Superintendent's first year in office. The School Committee, however, is expecting measurable progress on standards-based education in the next three years.

As we embark on the standards-based journey in the Arlington Public Schools, we invite the public to come to our meetings or to watch them on television. The School Committee does not have all the answers to the question of how best to educate every one of the 4600 children in our system. However, in the coming year and beyond we hope to improve learning for all students at every academic level.

Jeff Thielman is the Chairman of the Arlington School Committee