

English Language Arts Program Review

Visiting Team Report

Visit: November 2-4, 2010

The English Language Arts Program Review Visiting Team, in response to the cordial invitation of Bedford Public School's superintendent, Dr. Maureen LaCroix, spent three intensive days working closely with the system's administrators, ELA teachers, support staff, students and parents as part of a comprehensive peer view of Bedford's system wide ELA program and practices. As part of the process, the team read all materials prepared by the department, met with representatives of all constituent groups, observed classroom instruction, and reviewed student work. Comprised of six ELA educators, team members focused on the elementary, middle and high schools in pairs, reporting their observations, commendations, and recommendations below:

Davis / Lane ELA Writing Program Report

Lynda Steinberg, Literary Specialist, Weston Public Schools

Jean Thuma, Literary Specialist, Alcott School, Concord, MA

Program Review Question #1: To what extent is the ELA –K-12 writing program comprehensive, well articulated, well sequenced, and aligned with state frameworks?

In K-5 classrooms we saw evidence that students are expected to write across the curriculum in multiple genres. In addition, we saw displays of student work on bulletin boards at Lane School and in individual classrooms at Davis School. A collection of student work K-5, provided to us by the Language Arts Coordinator, further confirmed the breadth and range of student writing.

There is clear evidence of focused learning goals and teachers demonstrating a consistency of purpose within their lessons. The mini lessons are brief and concise, as is desirable. In all rooms students are engaged in teacher directed writing or writing-related tasks for an appropriate amount of time. A notable strength is the use of classroom resources during writing. Not only do children have these resources in their folders, they actually take them out and refer to them often as they write. Teachers provide editing checklists, high frequency word books, vivid vocabulary lists and other kinds of reference materials to support children in the writing process. They show enthusiasm for lessons and for their students' work, which fosters positive, active student engagement. Technology is being integrated into writing in exciting ways, two examples being the netbook/Smartboard classroom and the Croatia e-pal project.

The logic and sequence of the lessons being taught seemed appropriate for the development of writers at this time of the year. At Lane School we observed a consistency within and across grades in what was

being taught. The same learning goals are apparent in nearly every classroom probably as a result of teachers uniformly using the Empowering Writing Program for their mini-lessons. To further the clear articulation of the writing program we suggest that specific learning goals be written for each grade that describe what students should know and be able to do. For example: “student will introduce a topic in a written piece and support it with two or more sentences which expand the topic.” Also, continue with the development of rubrics that measure student’s growth as writers in consistent ways. Ideally, a K-5 rubric would be powerful.

During our visits at Davis School we observed teachers using some of the methods of writing experts such as Mary Ellen Giacobbe and Lucy Calkins. Following discussions with some of the Davis teachers and with grade level leaders, we concluded Davis would benefit from a more cohesive approach to the writing curriculum. We saw excellent instruction yet came away without a clear understanding of how all the individual classroom pieces within and across the grades fit together. Specific K-2 learning goals might help as well to strengthen the written production of younger students, even those in kindergarten. The kindergarten benchmark goals in the developmental program at Bedford differ from those in Concord or Weston; it may be helpful to do a comparison and analysis.

The writing program is aligned with the state frameworks to the extent that it teaches for development and support of ideas, for the use of a writing process, and for writing in multiple genres. However, we feel that it could be stronger in two areas:

1. Independent planning - We noted what seemed to us to be an over-reliance on highly scaffolded writing organizers from kindergarten through fifth grade. What would be more desirable would be a gradual release of responsibility for students within and, certainly, across the grades.
2. Development of topic ideas with adequate supporting details – At both schools we felt that pages used for writing could limit the amount of topic development the students produced. (The frameworks state that students should write with a clear focus and adequate supporting details.) Some students were aware that they could go on to a new page of writing; others believed they had met expectations when they came to the end of one page. One suggestion for K-2 is to consistently provide students with a multi –page booklet, and to encourage them to plan out how they will use each page to develop their topic. We did observe this practice in several classrooms. At Lane many lessons target instruction for a particular purpose. The ensuing guided practice is tightly tied to the mini-lesson focus, but the writing space provided is limited. It would be a closer match to the frameworks standards if students routinely work on the fuller development of ideas with supporting details.

The Language Arts Coordinator and Writing Committee teachers should be allotted professional development time to articulate clear learning goals for writing at each grade level. This would also provide an opportunity to align with the common core frameworks. Linda Volpicelli’s expertise benefits both Lane and Davis schools. The district should continue to seek ways to equalize her presence at both schools.

Program Review Question #2: To what extent are oral communication skills emphasized and developed in the ELA curriculum K-12?

At the Kindergarten level there is clear focus and a philosophy to develop oral language skills before students write. Classroom teachers use mentor texts and model explicitly. Students are able to apply oral skills that are the focus of the lesson. In grades 1-5, those teachers whom we observed and spoke with all reported providing informal opportunities for students to communicate orally, but agreed that within and across grades there is inconsistency. In all of the writing workshops we observed students sharing their writing orally and working in groups or pairs in contexts which required them to have discourse with peers. There is a need for common assignments and rubrics for assessing oral language at each grade level.

Program Review Question #3: To what extent are research skills integrated, well articulated, and sequenced in the ELA K-12 curriculum?

Although no specific research instruction was observed in classrooms, grade level leaders report that students at every grade engage in various kinds of research across the curriculum. We saw some evidence of research in classrooms, particularly science journals. That said, they all agree that learning goals related to research could be more clearly defined at each grade. Several grade level leaders refer to research skills being taught as part of the library instructional program. However, they are not able to clearly articulate the scope and sequence at their grade level or for the district. Attention to articulation of research learning goals is indicated.

Program Review Question #4: How effectively does the department communicate its mission, program, coursework, and policies?

Parents feel that communication about writing at the K-5 level is excellent. They cite portfolios as a “highly useful way to keep everyone on the same page” and feel “absolutely well informed.” Parents find email very helpful in communications and comment that teachers respond quickly to parent questions or concerns. Teachers have high standards for communications, including parent letters, parent conferences, and presentations for parents. They are also considering posting learning expectations and writing exemplars as possible methods for improving communication between home and school.

Teachers feel there is too much on their plates. Several different curriculum initiatives are in play. While they would like to look at student work more closely and reflectively, there is not time. They need more collaborative time, especially at Lane. It is especially difficult to bring new teachers and long-term subs up to speed when communication is so limited. We recommend that you explore ways to provide teachers with more time to collaborate about student writing and other topics.

Program Review Question #5: To what extent does the ELA curriculum and its delivery meet the needs of all students?

Special needs students, typically developing students, and gifted students are served well in the writing programs at Davis and Lane. Special needs students are included in all aspects of the writing programs that we visited. In many cases the inclusion is so seamless and unobtrusive that students on IEP’s cannot be easily identified. There are equally high expectations at each grade level for all students. Specialized

small group instruction is also provided for students who need more intensive support in pull out programs. Both Davis and Lane schools are in the process of implementing RTI for students who are at risk. It is unclear what kind of RTI or progress monitoring is occurring specific to additional writing in each of the 3 Tiers.

In all settings where we observed, every student, regardless of ability, is successfully accessing the curriculum either independently or with support. In some cases at Lane School there are support teachers in classrooms; in other cases the classroom teacher differentiates for the range of writers. As to meeting the needs of regular education students who are capable but not gifted, teachers should be mindful to challenge all students appropriately.

After discussing with grade level leaders and teachers and looking at schedules, we see the value of all teachers showing on their schedule where regular writing workshop occurs, with a minimum of 3 x 45 minutes allotted per week. While integrated writing should occur across the curriculum, it should not take the place of highly focused and explicit instruction with ample opportunities for students to develop as writers.

Summary of Commendations for Davis and Lane School

- Classroom instruction provides thoughtful focused learning goals with consistency of purpose within writing lessons.
- Teachers provide excellent communication about writing to parents.
- The consistently high expectations at each grade level serve the needs of the spectrum of ability levels with marked success.
- Teachers make excellent use of traditional classroom resources and skillfully integrate technology to support the writing process.

Summary of Recommendations for Davis and Lane School

- To further the clear articulation of the writing program we suggest that specific learning goals be written for each grade, which describe what students should know and be able to do. For example: “student will introduce a topic in a written piece and support it with two or more sentences which expand the topic.”
- Continue with the development of rubrics that measure students’ growth as writers in consistent ways. Ideally, a K-5 rubric would be powerful.
- Have students routinely work on the fuller development of ideas with supporting details.
- Develop common assignments and rubrics for assessing oral language at each grade level.
- At Davis School develop a more cohesive writing program with strong links between Kindergarten, Grade One and Grade Two.

- The Language Arts Coordinator and Writing Committee teachers should be allotted professional development time to articulate clear learning goals for writing at each grade level. This would also provide them with an opportunity to align with the common core frameworks.
- It has been noted by many that Linda Volpicelli's expertise benefits each school and adds strength to the writing program. The district should continue to find ways to equalize her presence at both schools.
- Articulate learning goals for research at each grade.
- Challenge capable students appropriately.
- Find ways to provide teachers with more time to collaborate about student writing and other topics.
- Work toward ensuring that regular writing workshops occur in every classroom with a minimum of 3 x 45 minutes allotted per week. While integrated writing should occur across the curriculum, it should absolutely not take the place of highly focused and explicit instruction and ample opportunities for students to develop as writers.

John Glenn Middle School (grades 6-8)

Allison Benadallah, ELA Teacher, Fuller Middle School, Framingham, MA

Karen Russell, ELA Teacher, Lexington High School, Lexington, MA

Program Review Question #1 To what extent is the ELA –K-12 writing program comprehensive, well articulated, well sequenced, and aligned with state frameworks?

We observed that the writing program at JGMS is comprehensive in nature and well articulated within the classroom setting and among teachers, resulting in a well-sequenced program that aligns with state frameworks. Sixth grade instruction strengthens and refines the foundation students bring from their elementary school writing practice. Teachers give particular attention to ensuring that each of the students in their heterogeneous classes has mastered the fundamental skills necessary to meet the expectations of the writing program that is in place. This includes learning standard formatting, using rubrics as a tool to improve writing, and understanding effective revision and editing techniques. One way that seventh grade works to meet the instructional needs of their students is by placing them in level 1 or level 2 classes. While level 1 students begin to develop a greater independence in idea development and use of voice in their writing, level 2 students are offered additional directive instruction for specific revisions. Both levels 1 and 2 in eighth grade focus on the application of writing as it relates to a variety of literary genres. Teachers pay special attention to challenging all students to demonstrate critical thinking skills in their writing.

COMMENDATIONS:

- There is a high level of student engagement in the writing process.
- There is clear evidence of scope and sequence within and between grade levels.
- Students and teachers use rubrics as a tool for clarity and engagement with the writing process.
- Teachers use a variety of models as exemplars.
- Student writing portfolios are maintained for each classroom.
- Teachers acknowledge students as writers and demonstrate a respect for student voice.
- Teacher-designed materials are not only visually appealing and accessible, they provide students with the structure needed for deepening and extending their ideas.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Provide opportunities for teachers to review student work to increase consistency in grading, inform instruction, and to monitor the efficacy of scope and sequence.
- Provide vertical team or summer workshop time for ELA teachers to develop grade level parental guidelines for supporting their child's development as a writer.
- Students should be provided with rubrics or assignment criteria soon enough to be useful as a guide for their writing.

Program Review Question #2: To what extent are oral communication skills emphasized and developed in the ELA curriculum K-12?

In all classes, we observed a variety of discussion formats that engaged almost all students in active oral communication. It was evident that students understand the importance of active inquiry and oral participation to their learning. Student-generated visuals often served as vehicles to support oral presentations. There is evidence of cooperative group activities that foster student dialogue. Although there is no documented evidence that there is a sequential approach to the development of formal presentation skills, there is consistent anecdotal evidence that oral communication is understood as an integral part of being a successful student.

COMMENDATIONS:

- The classroom climate engenders high expectations for rules of discourse as evidenced by the level of respect demonstrated by students during oral presentations and class discussions.

- Teachers utilize varied strategies during class discussions to maintain student engagement and equity in participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Provide opportunities for all grade level ELA teachers to develop and coordinate a scope and sequence specific to formal presentation skills.

Program Review Question #3: To what extent are research skills integrated, well articulated, and sequenced in the ELA K-12 curriculum?

In all grade level classes, teachers model the importance of researching an author's historical and biographical context in order to develop a deeper understanding of the literature under study. Beginning in sixth grade, students are introduced to the importance of citing resources to ensure the integrity of their written work as well as the words of others. We saw examples of step-by-step instructions for how to cite resources within a project's written guidelines.

COMMENDATIONS:

- Teachers model the importance of study that extends beyond assigned reading to enrich literary appreciation.
- Students are expected to cite resources for all research-based activities.
- Availability of technology is evident for research, presentation and citation support.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- In response to the culture that the Internet has created of easy access and appropriation of both textual and visual works of others, helping students become aware at an earlier age of the ownership of words and ideas is more important. Consider introducing the concept of a student's responsibility to identify and give credit to another's work at the elementary level.
- Develop a clearer and more comprehensive sequence of research skills for grades 7 and 8.

Program Review Question #4: How effectively does the department communicate its mission, program, coursework, and policies?

Opportunities for communication with parents include specifically designated parent-conference days, Open House Night, a newsletter, email, ASPEN, progress reports and report cards. Additionally, many teachers have websites that keep parents and students apprised of upcoming assignments and their due dates. Curriculum overviews and guides are accessible on line and hard copies are available throughout the year. The nature of writing necessitates a more

subjective appraisal of a student's suitability for a recommended level. Parents are afforded an opportunity to override a student's placement.

COMMENDATIONS:

- Parents have multiple portals in which they can receive information of the curriculum and their child's progress.
- Open House nights and parent conference days are well attended.
- Teachers make themselves available during, after and before school hours for parent conferences.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Consider developing a document that more objectively presents the contributing data for the purpose of informing student placement decisions for 7th and 8th grade ELA classes.
- Consider additional ways to allow parents to see graded work currently kept in portfolios in the English classrooms.

Program Review Question #5: To what extent does the ELA curriculum and its delivery meet the needs of all students?

The middle school is experiencing its third year of a six-day cycle with longer teaching blocks of 54 minutes each. At the same time, the model of special needs service delivery changed as well. The demands in teacher time and accountability have increased due to demographics, state mandates, as well as school and district initiatives. While grade level mainstream ELA teachers have common planning time during the cycle, there is now less time available during the school day/cycle for consultation with special educators or vertical coordination. Because the spectrum of abilities has expanded, especially in the heterogeneous 6th grade classrooms, this communication is especially important to meeting the needs of all learners.

COMMENDATIONS:

- The extraordinary level of commitment by teachers is evident. They demonstrate a personal and professional interest and investment in their students overall well-being.
- There is a strong desire on the teachers' part to collaborate with each other and the support staff.
- Teachers take great care in developing pathways for students to achieve success in their classes.
- Grade level ELA teachers demonstrate a strong partnership in coordinating units, lessons, and assessments.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Consider creating more time in the schedule for teachers to meet with special educators and 504 liaisons in order to support student needs.
- Consider increasing department based professional development opportunities that provide ELA teachers with practical strategies and approaches to improve differentiated delivery of instruction rather than emphasizing product oriented outcomes.
- Encourage teachers to take advantage of opportunities to visit other classrooms and middle schools.
- Continue to provide building substitutes for coverage so that teachers can observe other ELA classrooms.
- Provide flexible time in the school day to offer greater opportunity for individual help.

Program Review Question #6: To what extent are expectations and learning goals clear and specific within and between grade levels in the literacy curriculum?

Students actively use writing to reinforce reading. S.O.S. (Student Owned Strategies) reading instruction at the sixth grade level provides opportunities for explicit instruction of various reading strategies. ELA teachers report that they incorporate learned reading strategies in their instruction of literature that is predominantly fiction in all grades. This emphasis on fiction will need to be adjusted in the next several years as the district aligns itself to Common Core standards and their increased emphasis on non fiction reading and writing skills. With regard to summer reading, while there is no mandated program in place, teachers, students and parents are open to the idea and see it as valuable as long as there is constructive accountability when school resumes.

COMMENDATIONS:

- Rich sharing of ideas among teachers to engage students in literature appreciation and skill building.
- Sixth grade students receive valuable core reading instruction as an additional class.
- Evidence of a curriculum focus on diverse perspectives that gives students a broader understanding of differences and commonalities in human nature.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Consider identifying key reading strategies and posting them throughout the school.

- Find ways to incorporate more nonfiction reading and writing in ELA classrooms that focus on contemporary areas of interest for students.
- Continue to consider designs for a required summer reading program, perhaps one based upon student choice or interest rather than ability level.

Summary Commendations and Recommendations for John Glenn Middle School ELA

COMMENDATIONS:

- Teachers and students come well prepared to actively engage in a positive partnership that makes productive use of class time through a variety of coordinated learning activities.
- Teachers take great care to set clear purpose and support students' attainment of high expectations for success in the reading and writing process.
- A seriousness of purpose balanced with an emphasis upon focusing students' attention with challenging, accessible high interest literature and learning materials define the curriculum for heterogeneous sixth grade classes as well as both learning levels at the seventh and eighth grades.
- Teachers stress the use of learning tools such as Smartboards, Internet technology, rubrics, and writing portfolios to support their students' composition skills.
- A sense of cheerful collaboration within the classroom and among teachers is evident in classroom dynamics, the design of instruction and examples of student work.
- A scope and sequence that builds upon an understanding of students' cognitive and skill development exists in a vertical coordination of curriculum through the middle school years.
- Parents, students and support staff provide ample anecdotal evidence that the work of the ELA teachers is exemplary in effort, dedication, creativity and effectiveness.
- Teachers view department leadership as strong and supportive, setting direction based upon mutual respect that fosters individual teacher initiative, excellent collaborative partnerships within grade levels, and strong vertical integration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Build into the schedule more frequent and regular meeting times with support staff to address the growing demands of the special needs students demographics and the state and federal mandates.
- Continue to develop RTI interventions to address student deficits.
- Support teacher facility with technology by offering professional development that focuses on direct classroom application in lieu of requiring product oriented outcomes.
- Develop a clearer and more comprehensive sequence of research skills for grades 7 and 8.

- Optimize use of rubrics by integrating them into the writing process during the formative stages of composition.
- Continue to consider designs for a summer reading program that provides clear and reasonable expectations for student participation and considers the possibilities inherent in fostering cross-ability level community building discussions based upon shared interests.

Bedford High School (Grades 9-12)

Elizabeth Crowell, Interim Department Head, English Teacher, Lexington High School

Elizabeth Riemer, English Teacher, Weston High School

Program Review Question 1: To what extent is the ELA K-12 writing program comprehensive, well articulated, well sequenced, and aligned with state frameworks?

Students begin in the ninth grade year with “An Introduction to High School Writing,” a guide that sets out the writing process and holds together the writing training for the ninth grade. This guide gives excellent citation direction as well as step-by-step guidelines for the writing process, including a sample paper.

The writing curriculum overview sets out learning goals for each year (grades 6-12) as well as common or equivalent assessments and skills emphasized. It also includes common practices of all English teachers, such as using a process approach for major pieces of writing. It serves as a solid foundation for the program, although it will need to be revised in the next several years to align with the Common Core Standards. In many of the approximately 20 classes we observed, teachers incorporated a wide variety of writing instruction and activities: some extemporaneous writing, instruction on writing skills (i.e. thesis writing), and references to upcoming writing assignments. 87% of students surveyed believe that they have developed as writers through use of the writing process, and 92% believe that they have experienced a variety of writing opportunities in English class.

Each grade completes a yearly research project with clear emphasis on citation, different kinds of sources (oral, paper, electronic) and integration of facts and ideas. The research projects reflect vertical design, so that each year builds on skills of the previous year, leading to the culminating project of grade 12, which is still in its formative stages (we did not see examples of these).

We looked at many writing folders in which we saw a variety in amount and kinds of writing, suggesting the comprehensive nature of the program. We noted that rubrics seem to be more consistently present in 9th and 10th grades than in upper grades, and student interviews indicate that this is true. Some, but not all, folders have a metacognitive tool, such as a strength/weakness sheet, or an instructional sheet, such as proofreading guide. While the development of writing skills is clearly emphasized in the English classrooms, there is a need to

develop more consistency in the development of common or equivalent assessments as well as accompanying rubrics and metacognitive tools.

COMMENDATIONS:

- The department has committed to vertical integration by initiating vertical teams in the 2010-2011 school year. We already see evidence of successful vertical integration, most notably in the research projects from grades nine through twelve.
- The department writing handbook provides clear guidelines for students, parents, teachers, and support staff and fosters consistency across levels and grades.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Continue to work at each grade level to develop a more consistent approach to the number and types of writing assignments taught each quarter.
- Scaffold the writing process with tools such as rubrics, checklists, and focus areas of correction for major pieces of writing in all classes for purposes of both instruction and evaluation.
- Continue to build rubrics from school wide expectations.

Program Review Question 2: To what extent are oral communication skills emphasized and developed in the ELA curriculum K-12?

Students seemed enthusiastic and comfortable speaking out in most classes we observed. Teachers used oral presentations regularly and referred frequently to use of Socratic seminars. Many teachers used group work for at least a section of class. While there was no compelling evidence in the classrooms of an articulated sequence of oral presentation skills, we did see advancement in students' ability to speak in class from ninth grade to twelfth, both in more formal oral presentations and in more informal class discussions. In a tenth grade classroom, for example, the teacher provided students with specific guidelines for listening to presentations and provided specific instructions for the presenters themselves. In a higher-level senior class, students presented posters that revealed more sophisticated analysis and more independence in their choices. Those seniors still had clear criteria that they had to include in their posters and in their oral presentations, but the varied approaches of different groups suggested more latitude in their work and further development in their presentation skills.

The same progression seemed clear in less formal oral communication skills as well. In another ninth grade class, for example, we observed more structured class discussion, with students guided by a hand-out as they watched a film. The teacher then worked from that hand-out in bringing students into a discussion about the film clip. In a senior class at the same level, students were working successfully to discuss an article without an accompanying handout. That

teacher of seniors still guided discussion, but with less support needed. In a junior level 5 class, similarly, students worked in small groups to discuss a section of the text and showed great independence in their oral communication skills. They were using a framework provided by the teacher, but they worked collaboratively with one another, achieving a sense of autonomy within their small groups. The senior research project completed by all students requires a formal oral presentation that allows students to share their culminating work. It is clear that engagement and participation in class are key to success in English classes.

COMMENDATIONS:

- Oral skills are valued and developed within the English classroom.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A more definitive sequence of oral presentation skills, along with accompanying rubrics, should be developed.

Program Review Question 3: To what extent are research skills integrated, well articulated and sequenced in the ELA K-12 curriculum?

The research skills are developed thoughtfully and comprehensively in each course. The projects for each year are age-appropriate, engaging, and cumulative from year to year. They encourage original thinking and synthesizing and incorporate a wide range of sources. The student writing guide provides excellent citation information and helpful guidance for analytical writing overall. In classes we observed, students enriched their understanding by researching microfinance, using the Internet to investigate literary theory, viewing online photos, and reading varied texts. 84% of BHS students surveyed report that they are developing research skills, including accurate evaluation and citation of sources. Similarly, 87% of students believe that they are developing a sense of independent inquiry, including skill in questioning the validity of an argument. Parents with whom we spoke felt that students have learned about citing and evaluating sources at JGMS and BHS. Although plagiarism is a concern, teachers are addressing plagiarism through the handbook and through assessment and test-quiz design. The research projects, along with the formative assessments that shape them, are integral to developing critical thinking skills through independent inquiry.

COMMENDATIONS:

- There is a comprehensive research project for all students at each grade level.
- These projects are vertically aligned to develop each year on the skills of the previous year.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Work toward greater consistency in the research projects in terms of learning goals and student expectations in grades 11 and 12.
- The MLA process needs to be more consistently practiced and reinforced at each grade level and across disciplines.

Program Review Question 4: How effectively does the department communicate its mission, program, coursework, and policies?

Though not all teachers have course web pages, all use some type of electronic homework posting and class expectations are posted on the school site. Again, the writing guide clearly guides students, parents, and support staff. Parents report no issues with communication except a desire to see graded student writing and assignment rubrics more frequently. Parents express real gratitude for the availability of teachers by email and in person for their students. 84% of students report that English course requirements, policies, and expectations, and support opportunities are clearly communicated. The leveling rubrics in the Program of Studies are clear, and the descriptions of levels 4 and 5 are clear in the English section of the program of studies. A description of levels 2 and 3 would help to strengthen that section of the Program of Studies.

COMMENDATIONS:

- Teachers clearly communicate homework and expectations through a variety of modalities to accommodate student learning styles.
- Teachers communicate effectively with parents and other staff.
- Leveling rubrics are clear.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Add levels 2 and 3 in the leveling guidelines included in the Program of Studies.

Program Review Question 5: To what extent does the ELA curriculum and its delivery meet the needs of all students?

Most teachers work to connect with all students in all classes. We were especially impressed with the variety of programs to support students: EXCEL, MCAS support, Special Ed, METCO tutoring. The leveling system is structured to allow movement between levels and to provide structure and support as needed. 85% of responding students report that materials are presented and concepts are assessed in ways that meet a variety of learning styles. 61% of responding students agree that the English department offers sufficient options or courses for supplementary support. Level 5 classes support high-level thinking as shown in discussion, journal writing, and papers. Our sense was that there was greater variation and less consistency in teachers'

expectations at level 4. It is possible that teachers were responding to students' more or less developed analytical skills, but we lack sufficient knowledge of the students' skill levels in the particular classes and thus cannot draw a certain conclusion. We did see some excellent examples of lessons geared toward higher-order thinking at level 4. Students were working very thoughtfully with paradox and irony in one level four senior class, for example. In another mixed level 4-5 senior class we saw sophisticated analysis in class discussion and in students' writing folders. Some students in level 4 classes would benefit from greater differentiation in options that entail higher order thinking, including analysis and synthesis. We suggest that the department examine level 4 assessments and expectations to provide more opportunities and incentives for higher order thinking.

Students report that it grows more difficult to move up and down levels for junior and senior year partly because the gap between levels in the depth of critical thinking and detailed analysis widens. In levels 2 and 3 there appears to be good scaffolding, pacing and subject matter for students, but students report and we observed that behavioral issues sometimes shape and slow down classes. In one ninth-grade level 2/3 class, the teacher provided more basic support by guiding students, yet also pushed the students toward higher-level thinking and led a discussion in which students analyzed the text thoughtfully. Behavior was not observed to be an issue in that class. There were several other classes, however, in which students were less focused and less engaged. Teachers at level 2-3 may benefit from additional support in developing more effective classroom management strategies, including establishing clear expectations and scaffolding of skills. It may be helpful for teachers of these courses to observe one another collaboratively to develop additional strategies.

There appears to be more racial diversity in the 2/3 levels than in levels 4 or 5. While the disparity in racial diversity at different levels may not have been the main factor in the classroom experience, it struck both of us after observing several classes. Bedford High School already has in place programs designed to support students in pushing toward higher-level classes, and the issue is of course one that extends well beyond Bedford.

COMMENDATIONS:

- Students seem comfortable and relaxed in their classes, fond of their teachers, and mostly ready to learn.
- Class participation and interactions with teachers were strong in most classes.
- Teachers have fostered positive, supportive climates in their classes.
- Multiple programs provide support for learners: METCO, EXCEL, Skill Center, Special Education, Writing Lab. Students are assisted and encouraged in multiple ways.

- Classrooms are inviting spaces that provide technological tools such as Smartboards, films, and online research. A number of teachers use these resources very well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Examine level 4 as described in the Program of Studies alongside level four in the classroom. Push toward more higher-order thinking in level four assessments such as quizzes, tests, and writing assignments.
- Teachers of level 4 courses should develop more consistency in their expectations.
- Provide opportunities for teachers to observe each other's classes to develop additional effective management and teaching strategies, particularly at levels 2 and 3.
- Teachers, especially in grades 11 and 12, need to develop consistent rubrics, especially for major or common assessments.
- Take a closer look at the racial diversity in each level in an effort to provide equity and access for all students.

Program Review Question 6: To what extent are expectations and learning goals clear and specific within and between grade levels in the 6-12 literacy curriculum?

The reading curriculum overview sets out the sequence of skills emphasized and developed each year as well as common or equivalent assessments and central concepts. The accompanying UbD documents set out essential questions and enduring understandings for each of the central units taught each year. There is clear evidence of backward planning and of direct connections to essential questions in numerous classes. In a senior Global Voices class, for example, in showing students the day's agenda, the teacher highlighted the connection to an essential question about empathy and violence. In a ninth grade class, similarly, the teacher brought students back to the focus on identity in a hand-out and in the teacher's questions during discussion. Although essential questions are not immediately visible in every room or in every lesson plan observed, there is ample evidence of clear goals and backward planning.

We observed a variety of genres under study at various grades and levels. Seniors in a Global Voices class, for example, were reading a *National Geographic* article from 2008 after having read and presented works such as Ben Okri's short story "A Prayer for the Living" and E.M. Forster's essay "Tolerance." Several classes were working with novels, such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, while students in a senior Humanities class and a senior British Literature class were studying *The Canterbury Tales*. We did not see poetry study apart from senior classes, but we were in classes during only a three-day period. Analysis of literary elements progressed over the course of grades 9-12. Students seemed more independent in their work

with literary terms such as irony and theme in a 12th grade class, for example, as compared to more structured analysis of imagery and motif in a 9th grade class. The development seemed appropriate and clear.

While the grade level teams in grades 9 and 10 have made progress in establishing common goals and assessments, there is less evidence of that consistency in grades 11 and 12. Recent course additions, such as Global Voices or the revision of American Literature to American Perspectives, have enriched the offerings, but work on making those offerings more consistent in terms of skill development remains to be done.

COMMENDATIONS:

- Teachers show creativity in designing curriculum with a wide variety of texts and resources.
- Electives in senior year allow students freedom to follow their interests.
- Efforts are underway to unite those three senior electives through shared essential questions and some common assessments.
- Teachers use resources and have department support for new texts and approaches.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The department should continue to emphasize grade level team development, especially in terms of common expectations for students.
- Continue to emphasize higher-order thinking skills in levels 2-3 with appropriate pace and support.

Program Review Question 7: What would a comprehensive theater arts program at the high school add to our overall curricular offerings and opportunities for student development?

We feel that a comprehensive theater arts program would appeal to a diverse population of learners and provide a place for more varied cultural voices. It would enrich the English curriculum as a whole by providing another venue in which students could explore and perform literature. Students would develop and reinforce their oral reading and performance skills. They could see live productions as well as be introduced to sound and set design, which might appeal to more hands-on learners. Of student respondents, 39% indicated that they would be interested in taking drama-related courses such as playwriting, stagecraft, and directing. Similarly, 37% of respondents reported interest in taking a major course in Drama. 42% of respondents expressed that they would participate in a department-sponsored, non-musical production if it were offered.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Begin to investigate ways in which neighboring communities integrate drama more fully into curriculum offerings.

Summary Commendations and Recommendations for Bedford High School ELA

COMMENDATIONS

- Students seem comfortable and relaxed in their classes, fond of their teachers, and mostly ready to learn. Class participation and interactions with teachers were strong in most classes. Teachers have fostered positive, supportive climates in their classes.
- The department has committed to vertical integration by initiating vertical teams in the 2010-2011 school year. We already see evidence of successful vertical integrations, most notably in the research projects from grades nine through twelve.
- Teachers have shown creativity in designing curriculum with a wide variety of texts and resources.
- Teachers use a variety of activities and teaching techniques during individual class periods, including Smartboards, journals, collaborative learning, and presentations.
- The three electives in senior year allow students freedom to follow their interests.
- Efforts are underway to unite those three electives through shared essential questions.
- We observed strong department leadership and enthusiasm for teaching English.
- The department writing handbook provides clear guidelines for students, parents, teachers, and support staff and fosters consistency across levels and grades.
- Teachers have resources and department support for new texts and approaches.
- Multiple programs provide support for learners: METCO, EXCEL, Skill Center, Special Education, Writing Lab. Students are assisted and encouraged in multiple ways.
- Parents expressed gratitude about the accessibility of teachers to them and to their students, and students noted that accessibility as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to work at each grade level to develop a more consistent approach to the number and types of writing assignments taught each quarter.
- Scaffold the writing process with tools such as rubrics, checklists, and focus areas of correction for major pieces of writing in all classes, for purposes of both instruction and evaluation.
- Continue to build rubrics from school wide expectations.
- Continue working toward more team planning time beyond ninth grade in order to develop greater consistency from teacher to teacher.
- Examine level 4 as described in the Program of Studies alongside level 4 in the classroom. Push toward more higher-order thinking in level 4 assessments such as quizzes, tests, and writing assignments.
- Continue to emphasize higher-order thinking skills in levels 2-3 with appropriate pace and support.

- Begin to investigate ways in which neighboring communities integrate drama more fully into curriculum offerings.
- Take a closer look at the racial diversity in each level in an effort to provide equity and access for all students.
- Make use of the Common Core standards to develop K-12 sequences for reading, writing, research and speaking skills.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Russell

2010 ELA Program Review Visiting Committee Head