



PASADENA EDUCATION NETWORK

## **Choosing a Middle School, Part 1** **Principals Panel Discussion**

Summary of PEN Parent Education Program  
September 25, 2013, 6:30-8:30 pm  
Pasadena Central Library

### Overview

The purpose of this program was to prepare upper elementary grade parents to explore and evaluate their child's PUSD middle school options. PEN Program Director Susan Schwartz briefly reviewed key findings from PEN's Middle School Transition research, and from other research that has been done to identify what factors make for successful middle schools. Parents also received a copy of PEN's Middle School Matrix, which facilitates comparison of key features (e.g., size, schedule, electives) of PUSD's seven middle school programs.

The middle school principals introduced themselves and addressed the questions PEN had posed in advance of the program. They also took additional questions from PEN staff and audience members.

### Principals Panel

John Albert, McKinley (K-8)  
Mark Anderson, Marshall Fundamental (6-12)  
Lorena Martinez, Eliot Middle School  
Garrett Newsom, Sierra Madre Middle School  
Sarah Rudchenko, Wilson Middle School  
Trudell Skinner, Blair IB School (6-12)  
Merian Stewart, Washington Middle School

### ***What are you doing to ensure a culture of high expectations for all students at your school?***

High expectations for academic rigor are communicated in several ways:

- In-depth exposure to standards – students know what standard they are covering, and can explain what they need to know and do to master that standard.
- Clear rubrics for every assignment – students know what criteria teachers will use to evaluate their work
- High-quality student work is on display in the classroom and school hallways
- Teachers give timely feedback to students so that they know what they did well and what they need to do to improve/meet the standard
- Lessons are scaffolded in such a way that they are accessible to students at different levels. Systematic interventions are used to help struggling students.

### ***What is your instructional team doing to prepare for transition to Common Core Standards?***

Many of our teachers were involved in the Curriculum Revision Workshops. Many of our teachers were piloting the new CC lessons last year – one reason for the dip in our CST scores; we were not necessarily covering the same standards that were being tested. Common Core has fewer standards, but emphasizes depth, application of concepts. This year is a transition year; CSTs will not be administered in the spring, and the new statewide testing will not be implemented until 2014-15. Students will begin

to get a taste of “Smarter Balanced” assessment, which involves fewer questions, but which more planning, critical thinking, being able to explain why you got a certain answer. In the classroom this year, students will be doing more project-based learning (PBL). The District has received CC implementation funding this year, which is being used for technology upgrades and teacher professional development.

***How are incoming students placed in Math, and what opportunities are there for advanced students to accelerate?***

Placement of incoming students has been based primarily on their CST scores, with some schools administering a placement test. Under the old standards, advanced 6<sup>th</sup> graders were exposed to some pre-Algebra and had the opportunity to take Algebra in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and Geometry in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. HOWEVER, the Common Core Standards for Math are organized very differently than the 1997 California math standards. The Common Core secondary school math sequence is: Math 6, 7, 8; Algebra 1, Geometry, Algebra 2.\*

Middle school students may still accelerate through the sequence as appropriate, but Algebra 1 is now a high school course; it is more like what Algebra 2 was under the old standards, and it will not be offered in middle school. Math Field Day this year will use the new Common Core-style “Smarter Balanced” assessment questions, with fewer, more complex problems that involve multiple steps. (An 11<sup>th</sup> grade sample math question, for example, is meant to take 45 minutes to solve.)

\* NOTE: SINCE THE PANEL DISCUSSION, THE DISTRICT’S GRADUATE PROFILE COMMITTEE HAS AGREED ON AN INTEGRATED SEQUENCE OF HIGH SCHOOL MATH COURSES (“Integrated Math 1, 2, and 3”) which would all students would be required to take in order to graduate. The 1-2-3 sequence covers the same material that would be covered in the Algebra-Geometry-Algebra sequence, but in a more integrated fashion. It is UC-approved and has already been adopted by many school districts. Most of this year’s 8<sup>th</sup> graders (who are now taking CC Math 8) would transition seamlessly into Integrated HS Math 1 next year. Eighth graders who are taking Geometry this year would continue next year with Geometry in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and Algebra 2 in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Beginning in 2014, advanced middle schoolers would have the opportunity to take an integrated Math 6 & 7 course in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, preparing them for Math 8 in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and Integrated Math 1 in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

***What electives are offered in middle school?***

Middle school students are encouraged to explore a range of electives. The District has moved away from the block schedule model (which had students taking 90 minutes of ELA and Math every day, with other courses alternating on an A/B Day schedule). This has made it easier for all schools to offer a wider range of elective courses, including art, music, robotics, Spanish, dance, drama, yearbook, student leadership, and creative writing. (See Middle School Matrix for school-specific offerings.) The six-period schedule also gives middle schools more flexibility in providing intervention for students who are struggling in ELA and math. In some cases, students may be placed in an intervention class on an “as needed” basis, with the opportunity to move back to an elective class once he or she has caught up.

***What are middle schools doing to improve/ensure a positive social environment?***

Schools have been implementing a combination of Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS) strategies to model and support positive behaviors, as well as Response to Intervention (RTI) strategies to catch and correct problems before they are a problem. All children need to feel safe and nurtured in order to learn, and middle school children not only need to know the rules, but also understand why the rules are in place.

Clubs, activities and organized sports are key to increasing positive social interactions and giving all students a way to feel connected. Clubs and activities vary somewhat from school to school and from year to year. Organized sports take place mostly through the LEARNS afterschool program. All schools currently offer flag football, basketball, and soccer. Tennis and swimming will be added this year, and girls' softball and boys' baseball will be added next year. The middle schools are working with the high school athletic directors to align sports activities, and a Varsity level of competition has been added. (Anyone can still play JV, but middle school varsity teams will be more competitive.)

***What opportunities are there for high-achieving or advanced students?***

All the middle school programs offer opportunities for students to accelerate in math and to take some type of honors-level class in their core subjects. Some school-specific variations:

Washington MS' Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math (STEAM) focus integrates some component of the STEAM subjects into every class, using project-based learning.

In addition to offering an honors section of core classes available to proficient and advanced students, Wilson MS has started a stronger, faster-paced Advanced Studies program for 6<sup>th</sup> graders who are at the advanced level. (The program will grow to include 7<sup>th</sup> and then 8<sup>th</sup> grade in the next two years.) Wilson also uses an online writing program called "My Access" that facilitates getting substantive feedback on written work. Wilson is also developing a "Health and Wellness" Academy, or focus area.

Sierra Madre also offers an Advanced Scholars program, and will be welcoming the Mandarin-English dual language immersion program students as they start promoting from Field Elementary.

Eliot MS has received funding to support its Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) Academy. In addition to offering an honors section for all core courses and is adding a 5<sup>th</sup> "C" – cultural competency – to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning paradigm's 4 Cs (Communication, Creativity, Critical Thinking and Collaboration).

All Blair middle through 10<sup>th</sup> grade students are enrolled in the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (MYP), an academically rigorous program that requires the school to fit eight subject areas (including foreign language) into what is essentially a six-period day. The MYP prepares all students for the option of pursuing an IB Diploma or entering one of the other College/Career Pathways in high school. Blair will be welcoming the Spanish-English dual language program students as they start promoting from San Rafael (and, eventually, from Jackson).

Marshall has a strong college focus, with students encouraged to take Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school. At the middle school level, so-called "AP Prep" classes are essentially honors sections, but with an expectation that students can handle a larger work-load as well as a faster pace. Where most middle schools expect that students will have 1 to 1 ½ hours of homework M-Th, Marshall's "pre-AP" students may have 3+ hours of homework, four nights/week, according to Principal Mark Anderson. Sixth graders have an arts elective, but small groups of students (~10/class) are pulled out for intervention as needed; once they have catch up to grade level, they can go back to taking art.

McKinley's motto is "Arts and Smarts," with deep integration of the arts in every subject. Because it is a K-8 school, there is strong articulation from elementary through middle school, and because the number of students who enter McKinley at middle school is small, they can be integrated quickly into the learning community.

## Audience Questions

### ***How do schools ensure that kids are not overwhelmed with homework – do teachers coordinate assignments and testing?***

Teachers do communicate, and Board Policy does set guidelines for homework

### ***What kinds of programs are in place to prevent/deal with bullying?***

Explicit anti-bullying curricula and social-emotional learning is embedded in many of the schools' advisory lessons. The District is piloting an anonymous tip (phone/text) line, but the important thing is to develop the students' self-advocacy skills. Marshall, for example, uses peer mentors (8<sup>th</sup> graders are given training and then paired with incoming 6<sup>th</sup> graders.) Parents need to be aware and vigilant when it comes to monitoring cyber-bullying, and schools are willing to work with parents on that.

### ***How is technology used in the classroom, and what are teachers doing to prepare students?***

All campuses will be wireless by the end of this year, and all will have computer labs, as well as a 5:1 student laptop ratio. Professional development for teachers around use of technology in the classroom is part of the Common Core Professional Development plan that is being funded this year through the Local Control Funding Formula. STEAM will receive \$500,000 for each of the next three years, and every student will be provided with a Notebook.

### ***What is the ratio of students to counselors?***

The District's student: counselor ratio is 400:1, not including 6<sup>th</sup> graders; however, middle school counselors do serve 6<sup>th</sup> grade students.

### ***Is there an entrance exam for Washington MS?***

Incoming students have to fill out an application, but there is no academic pre-requisite for entrance. WMS did give all incoming students a placement exam this year, and other middle schools are now using it as well.

### ***Is there a Uniform Policy at middle schools?***

Ed Code allows schools to establish a dress code, but not to require students to wear a uniform. However, some schools (Blair, Eliot) have more narrowly-defined uniform policies in place.

### ***Do middle school students have access to libraries?***

Blair and Marshall have staffed libraries available to both HS and MS students. Sierra Madre is building a library in its new campus. The middle school principals have made reinstating librarians at the middle schools a high priority as additional funding becomes available.

### ***How do parents stay on top of all the new developments, esp. with Common Core?***

Marshall PTSA sponsors monthly parent meetings to discuss these topics, and PEN has also organized informational programs, as has the District. Schools encourage parents to contact their child's teacher or the counselor if they have questions or if their student is struggling with homework.

### **TOURS: see PEN's online calendar or PEN News for latest information**

Eliot – second Weds at 8:45 am      Wilson – 1<sup>st</sup> Tues at 9 am      Washington – Tues & Weds at 8 am  
Sierra Madre MS – 1<sup>st</sup> Weds at 9 am      McKinley – will be first Weds at 9:30 am  
Blair – typically 1<sup>st</sup> Friday at 8 am      Marshall – typically 3<sup>rd</sup> Thurs at 2 pm