

To: District 64 Board of Education
Dr. Laurie Heinz, Superintendent

From: Dr. Lori Lopez, Assistant Superintendent for Student Learning

Date: December 11, 2017

Re: Update on Middle School Review Committee Activities

As you know, the District 64 Middle School Review Committee launched its work in September and is being guided by Association of Middle Level Education (AMLE) consultant Dr. Ann McCarty. AMLE is the leading international organization focused exclusively on the unique needs of adolescent learners.

The committee's initial discussions were framed around the [*16 Characteristics of Effective Middle Schools*](#) based on AMLE's landmark position paper, [*This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*](#). Based on a study of this work, the committee developed belief and vision statements in order to craft a middle school mission statement. This information was shared with all stakeholders in October and can be found on the [District 64 Middle School Review webpage](#).

On Friday, October 13, AMLE Consultant Dr. Ann McCarty met with student focus groups from all grade levels and both middle schools. Students shared feedback about what they most value about middle school, their connections to adults, and what they might like to see in the future.

At its December 4 meeting, the Middle School Review Committee discussed the nine overall themes of this data which include:

1. Middle school is more challenging than 5th grade.
2. Opportunities to make new friendships are important.
3. Middle schoolers need help with strategies for organization.
4. Middle schoolers can identify an adult to connect with for problem-solving. Seventh graders feel less connected to teachers than they did in 6th grade.
5. Middle schoolers truly value their elective classes.
6. Middle schoolers have a variety of ideas for elective classes. In addition:
 - Sixth graders at one building expressed satisfaction with the elective schedule; 6th graders at the other building would like to choose from a list like 7th and 8th graders do.
 - Seventh graders would like more time for electives.
 - Seventh graders prefer a schedule with alternating core and electives classes.
 - Seventh graders identified Animation and additional science topics as potential elective choices.

- Half of the student groups identified Study Hall as a potential elective choice.
- 7. All students are supportive of an Advisory period. Two-thirds of the student groups were looking for a time to connect with teachers about their learning and did not comment on SEL support; one-third commented positively about SEL support.
- 8. Half of the student groups expressed concern about the volume of homework on different nights.
- 9. Two-thirds of the student groups expressed concern about the shortness of the passing time between classes.

In addition, at the beginning of November we also sought feedback from parents, staff and community members through a ThoughtExchange survey. During this two-week digital conversation, 830 participants contributed almost 1,400 thoughts and over 39,000 ratings/stars. The vast majority of participants were parents (704), followed by staff members (176), and a small number of community members (26). A formal report is being prepared by our ThoughtExchange consultant and will be shared and posted to the District 64 website in January.

Generally, themes included:

- appreciating teachers and staff
- valuing and updating the elective curriculum
- focusing on writing instruction
- supporting social-emotional learning
- improving the parent-school partnership
- implementing consistent discipline policies
- streamlining district initiatives

The Middle School Review Committee has established a Scheduling Subcommittee to further review scheduling ideas and generate multiple schedule options. In mid-January, this Scheduling Subcommittee will work with Dr. Michael Rettig to generate a variety of schedules for consideration. Dr. Rettig has served as a consultant on school scheduling issues in 43 states with over 1,000 schools nationally and internationally. He has conducted hundreds of workshops and has authored or co-authored numerous articles and books on school scheduling and related topics. Once the subcommittee has brainstormed scheduling options, we will bring these options forward to parents and staff for feedback.

Ongoing communication about Middle School Review Committee work will continue:

- An update will be included in upcoming District 64 eNews newsletters. All community members are welcome to [subscribe to the eNews via the website](#).
- The [Middle School Program Review webpage on the d64.org website](#) will be updated.
- The ThoughtExchange report will be posted to the webpage when it is completed in January. We will communicate with all stakeholders when it becomes available.
- As potential scheduling options are developed, we will share them and seek additional feedback from parents and staff.

The committee has been tasked to provide consultative feedback to help inform a recommendation from District 64's administration to the Board of Education later this school year.