

REPORT OF THE
PROGRAM DESIGN SUBCOMMITTEE
SUPERINTENDENT'S COMMITTEE ON
NATHAN BISHOP MIDDLE SCHOOL

October 19, 2006

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The subcommittee was constituted to consider options for the design of the program for Nathan Bishop Middle School. The options and recommendations below are premised on the recommendation of the Research Subcommittee, as endorsed by the full committee and accepted by the Superintendent, that Bishop open as a middle school (Grades 6-8) with site-based management.

The subcommittee first attempted to delineate the elements of a comprehensive plan for Bishop. These are outlined below. It is recognized that some of these elements may overlap more than the outline indicates. We do not regard the sub-topics in items 2 through 7 to be an exhaustive list. The sub-topics presented represent alternatives to be considered, not recommendations of the subcommittee. Those recommendations appear at the end of this report.

PLANNING ELEMENTS AND OPTIONS FOR THE NATHAN BISHOP MIDDLE SCHOOL PROGRAM

1. Core Academic Program & Curriculum
 - A. Type of Program
 1. International Baccalaureate Program
 2. Magnet School
 3. Advanced Academic Program
 4. Other
 - B. Courses Offered
 - C. Admission Criteria
 - D. Assignment of students to programs or classrooms
2. Special Academic & Instructional Features:
 - A. Themed School (e.g. fine arts, performing arts, technology, etc.)
 - B. Enrichment Opportunities (e.g. Academies of Inquiry and Talent Development)
 - C. Differentiated Instruction
 - D. After School Programs
3. Governance & Parental Engagement
 - A. Site-Based Management (as recommended by the full committee on 9/21/06)
 - B. School Improvement Team
4. Teacher Assignment & Training
 - A. Teaming and/or Looping of Teachers
 - B. Professional Development Programs
5. Counseling and Advisement
6. Extracurricular activities
 - A. Sports, Yearbook, Student Council, Band, etc.
7. Partnerships with Colleges, Universities and other Institutions & Organizations

The extensiveness of the above list, combined with the small size of the subcommittee, and the fact that the decision to recommend a middle school did not occur until September 21, led the subcommittee to determine that it was not feasible to specify all of the planning elements by Oct. 19. We agreed to specify the core academic program as closely as possible, and leave the remaining program areas for a later date, or another committee, at the Superintendent's discretion.

We proceeded identifying the primary goals of the academic program. These are listed below.

GOALS FOR THE CORE ACADEMIC PROGRAM:

1. Provide the best possible education for every student who attends the school.
2. Address the learning needs of all students by providing appropriate challenges for each, based on ability and achievement.
3. Prepare students for high school and open the path to college preparation.
4. Attractive to parents of children in the neighborhoods around Bishop; drawing more students into public schools.
5. Encourages parent engagement and community-building.
6. Available to students from outside the Bishop attendance area.
7. Program type can be used at any Providence middle school.

We then proceeded to consider three types of programs: International Baccalaureate Program, Magnet School, and Advanced Academic Program, as specified in the subcommittee's charge. Each was considered with respect to how well they fulfill the above goals. We determined that the disadvantages of each of the alternatives outweighed the advantages. Consequently, we considered a fourth, hybrid, program which the subcommittee recommends as the program for Nathan Bishop.

The following pages lay out the alternatives considered, along with the advantages and disadvantages of each. The advantages and disadvantages were considered in the context of the Providence public schools, not in the abstract.

ALTERNATIVE #1: INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE PROGRAM

Definition and features:

- A rigorous, internationally standardized academic curriculum focused on the humanities, mathematics, science, technology, foreign languages, the arts, and physical education.
- Overseen by the International Baccalaureate Organization; 1,888 schools in 124 countries.
- Can be whole-school or a program within the school.

Advantages:

- Rigorous academic program, internationally recognized curriculum.

Disadvantages:

- Extensive and expensive start-up process, including feasibility studies and year-long trial period. Teachers will have to undergo special training both before and after the program is authorized.
- Demanding curriculum and requirements for continuing IBO certification would result in the school (or program within the school) being highly exclusive.
- Without the ability to continue on to an IB diploma program in high school, a middle years IB program loses much of its appeal. There are no IB diploma programs in Rhode Island, and only seven in all of Massachusetts and Connecticut (private and charter schools included).

Comments:

IB programs are probably best suited for schools with large numbers of highly motivated students working at or above grade-level, who are likely to move from country to country before completing high school, and who are as strongly interested in university education outside the United States as within.

ALTERNATIVE #2: MAGNET SCHOOL

Definition and Features:

A school that offers a special focus on a selected area or areas (e.g., science, performing arts, computer graphics), and which draws interested students from throughout the school district.

NOTE: In Providence, magnet schools are legally required to mirror the demographics of the general population of students in the Providence schools. There are currently no magnet schools operating in Providence.

Advantages:

- Specialization permits selected areas to be studied in greater depth, and can promote a greater sense of community and common purpose.
- Provides academic programs unable to be supported in a conventional school; possibilities of partnerships with local companies and universities, involvement of local professionals.
- Federal funds available specifically for magnet school programs.

Disadvantages:

- Specialized curriculum may not attract sufficient number of interested students, or not enough from certain demographics.
- In many respects the antithesis of a neighborhood school; magnet schools are a better option at the high school level.

Comments:

- Lack of magnet status does not prevent a specific theme from being adopted by a neighborhood school.
- Application process for federal funds complex and burdensome.

ALTERNATIVE #3: MIDDLE SCHOOL WITH ADVANCED ACADEMIC PROGRAM

Definition and Features:

- Traditional Middle School with an advanced academic program for qualifying students.
- Three different programs within school: Special Education, general education, and advanced academic.
- Full-time, often permanent assignment to achievement groups (i.e. "tracking"). Students are admitted to the AAP. AAP students take academic courses (math, English, social studies and science) together as a group apart from general education. Special Education is separated from both.

Advantages:

- Rigorous academic program.
- Highly desired by parents and likely to draw students who would otherwise attend private schools.

Advanced academics ("gifted program") named by 58% of private school parents and a feature they would want to see in a public school (Brown Survey, 2001. See Appendix).

- No more expensive than regular middle school.

Greene cost per student is below the median for Providence middle schools.

- Fosters an environment that values academic achievement.

Data from Greene indicate "halo effect" that benefits the entire school, including students not directly enrolled in the program. Test scores for students in the general program *improve* from 6th-8th Grade.

Disadvantages:

- Rigidly tracked programs may not accommodate students who are above grade-level in one area but not others.
- Rigid division between grade-level and advanced students can be corrosive to sense of community and common purpose.
- May exclude neighborhood children who do not qualify for AAP.
- It is unclear whether Providence can currently sustain more than one full-fledged AAP.

ALTERNATIVE #4: RECOMMENDED PROGRAM

A neighborhood middle school (grades 6-8) that provides adequate and appropriate educational opportunities for all students in each of the following groups:

Students with special educational needs (Individual Education Plans and English Language Learners).

Students working below, at, or near grade-level.

Students working beyond grade-level.

Open Admission:

No application process or entrance examinations.

80% from the geographically proximate area.

20% admitted under "school choice" from outside the area.

Students will be placed in grade-level or above grade-level classes in *each subject* :

Math

English

Social Studies

Science

Foreign Language

Electives (Art, Music, etc)

- A student might be in any combination of advanced and grade-level classes (eg. Advanced Math & Spanish only).
- The school would not operate a discrete advanced academic program such as in place at Nathanael Greene, where students are either admitted to the program or not.

Placement based on grades, test scores, and teacher & advisor recommendations, as well as parent & student wishes.

The number of advanced offerings can vary with the number of eligible students.

All teachers (outside of special education specialists) prepared and qualified to teach grade-level and advanced classes.

RATIONALE FOR THE PROPOSED PROGRAM

1. The proposed program is not overly complex.

Our proposal builds on existing strengths and experience. Creating a magnet school or International Baccalaureate program would be a complex and demanding process, with considerable potential for unforeseen problems.

2. The proposed program is economically feasible and fair.

It would not be more expensive than regular middle schools.

Student success would depend more upon good-quality, student-appropriate instruction, less upon expenditures on peripheral resources.

Scheduling and assignment of students into appropriate classes for each subject will entail additional administrative costs. These costs will not be large, and can be reduced by efficient planning. In any event, they are amply justified by the goal of creating appropriate student assignment.

Providence's experience with advanced academics would mean that start-up cost associated with brand-new programs are avoided.

The proposed program not raise serious concerns about inequalities between schools. Magnet, I.B. or Advanced Academic programs, which cannot be easily replicated, might do so.

3. The proposed program is open, inclusive and flexible.

This plan provides a compromise between "tracked" programs and "differentiated instruction" programs:

Tracked programs place students in or out of the program, sometimes leading to inappropriate student assignments. Here, students are placed according to their talents and development in each subject.

Differentiated instruction, in which a class contains students of varying ability and achievement, requires the teacher to tailor lesson plans to each group in the class and demands special training. While it is appropriate in some circumstances, the proposed plan provides for more appropriate class assignments.

Eliminating rigid tracking creates the best program for each individual student and ensures greater equity in learning opportunities.

A more flexible program means that students are not usually either entirely in or out of the advanced academic program. They would not be classified as "advanced" or "non-advanced". Rather, they would participate in whatever advanced academic courses they are ready for. Classroom assignments would vary not only across subjects, but could change for each student in one or more subjects over the years that the child attends Bishop.

More flexible assignments will reduce intra-school antagonisms that arise when students are classified into groups. Fewer students will see themselves as exclusive or excluded.

Nearly all teachers would teach both grade-level and advanced courses, which would encourage academic excellence to be valued in all classrooms, to the benefit of every student.

4. The proposed program will be attractive to parents.

Some sort of beyond-grade-level instruction is highly desired by many parents. Many parents whose children are not accepted to the Greene AAP and who have not found another acceptable alternative among Providence middle schools will appreciate this approach. Providing an inclusive program serving a broader range of students at Bishop will encourage them to become part of the city's public education system.

5. Other Benefits.

Until such time as Providence can provide beyond-grade-level courses for students at all middle schools, the 20% of seats that are reserved for students from outside the Bishop attendance zone can be used to provide advanced academic courses to qualified students from across the city. In all probability, this proportion will be even higher in the early years of Bishop's operation.

Concerns about unequal treatment among schools will be minimized if Bishop opens with a program that is not entirely new and unique, but instead one that is an extension of programs already well established in other Providence schools (and readily extendable to others still).

CAVEATS AND CONCERNS

1. Well-trained & dedicated teachers, manageable class sizes, and effective administration are features without which no program at Bishop will succeed. Any plan for the school must address these.
2. The process for testing and admitting students into advanced academic courses must be handled in a transparent, fair, timely and professional manner.
3. The program should be constructed and implemented in a way that does not threaten the viability of the successful program at Greene.
4. Must comply with Grade-Level Expectations and Scope and Sequence.

FORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

After reviewing the issues and exploring the alternatives, the subcommittee makes the following two recommendations:

1. That Nathan Bishop Middle School re-open with a core academic program as described under Alternative #4 above.
2. That the subcommittee be reconstituted, or a new committee formed, to determine the remaining elements of the program. The committee should include experts from within the PPSD and from colleges and universities, parents and other community members from the primary Bishop attendance area and from the city as a whole, and teachers.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Appendix:

Selected Items from the 2001 Brown University Survey of Private School Parents

•Are there any ways that the public elementary or secondary schools could change that would lead you to consider sending your child there? 68% yes, 20% no, 12% don't know or no answer

If yes, what would those changes be? (open-ended responses coded into the following categories) 20% smaller class sizes, 15% safer schools, 9% better trained teachers, 5% more attention to children, 2% more parental involvement, 1% better neighborhoods for schools

•Would it encourage you to send your child to a Providence public school if the school had special programs for gifted students? 58% yes, 31% no, 11% don't know or no answer

•Please tell us how important each of the following factors are to your decision to send your child to a private school:

d) Teacher quality: 90% very important, 7% somewhat important, 1% not very important, 2% don't know or no answer

h) Overall academic reputation: 84% very important, 12% somewhat important, 2% not very important, 23% don't know or no answer

n) diverse courses in the curriculum: 64% very important, 27% somewhat important, 5% not very important, 4% don't know or no answer