

RISD Parent Advisory Council – 1.22.08

Does RISD have a districtwide program to address bullying in schools?

RISD has several programs in place to educate students and staff about bullying, how to identify it in its different forms, strategies to prevent it, and what steps to take when it does happen.

Every campus must adopt a bully prevention action plan annually. It outlines what that specific campus will do each year to combat bullying.

The district purchases a bully prevention manual for each campus, and bullying awareness training is available as part of their staff development requirements.

In addition, RISD uses a program called Discovery Health Connection, which covers bullying and a number of additional health and mental health issues. This program is available to all campuses.

If you are experiencing bullying issues at your child's campus, please report the specifics to the principal or appropriate administrator. They need to know the specific facts of each incident. This assists the administrator in investigating the issue to his/her fullest ability.

Why does the RISD focus on band instead of a foreign language in elementary school?

Unlike many districts, RISD's instructional model includes sixth-graders at the elementary level instead of middle school. In most districts, music instruction begins in sixth grade, the difference being that in RISD, those students are still at an elementary campus.

Beginning music instruction in sixth grade is essential to building quality and competitive fine arts programs at the secondary level, and for many students, offers a co-curricular activity that keeps them engaged in school throughout their secondary career. The connection between Fine Arts and other co- & extra-curricular activities and academic success is significant and supported by data.

RISD has offered foreign languages at the elementary level in the past, with mixed interest and success. Given the expense and time necessary, the district feels foreign language instruction is better suited for middle school.

The AVID Program, which is gaining a foothold at the elementary level in RISD, specifically teaches time management, organization and study habits. The program is also present at all secondary campuses.

Why isn't BCIS (Business Computer Information Systems) or Spanish I offered at North Junior High when it is offered at West Junior High?

BCIS is a high school course, and the district only receives funding for the course if offered in grades 9-12 or as part of a magnet program. West Junior High is a technology magnet campus and BCIS is offered as a course only to students in the technology magnet.

The district offers 12 one-semester courses for technology explorations, which is a focus for Junior High technology.

Spanish I is offered at all junior highs. A student must earn credit by taking Spanish A in the 7th grade and Spanish B in the 8th grade. Upon the completion of Spanish A and B, the student is awarded a credit for Spanish I.

As with many elective courses, there must be sufficient student interest each year at each campus for a section to be scheduled.

A student may also earn a math credit in junior high by taking Pre-AP 8th grade math.

RISD will also be offering Health and Communication Applications in junior high, which are semester credit courses.

Our PTA is trying to buy and maintain some sunshade structures for the playground/teachers area and irrigation systems for beautifying the area around the school. Can the process of working with RISD Facility Services to complete the project be made less complicated?

RISD developed a process for evaluating campus projects several years ago, which initially includes completing a one-page document. This allows the district to ensure proposed projects are built to appropriate city code and district construction standards, are sustainable projects using durable materials, do not conflict with existing function and infrastructure at the campus, and are approved by all parties involved.

This process became necessary since in the past, a number of campus projects were implemented somewhat haphazardly, resulting in inferior quality projects, unmanageable costs to the campus, and/or underutilization.

The district feels this is reasonable information to request and does not create an undue burden. Facility Services is always willing to work with each campus/group to address specific requests and issues, but groups should always first work through their respective campus principal.

Do the REACH bus routes or schedules need to be reviewed? My child gets to REACH after 8:30 a.m., when they are supposed to be there by 8:00 a.m.

None of the individuals associated with REACH transportation or the REACH program at this specific campus are aware of any issue that involves any of the buses being consistently late. Based on traffic, etc., any bus is going to run early or late from time to time. One area of confusion may be the start time for REACH. The buses are not scheduled to arrive before 8:10 a.m. at the request of the REACH program.

For specific questions about REACH transportation, please contact terry.mcguiffin@risd.org in the Office of Advanced Academic Studies.

Other than the campus cafeteria manager, who is the best person to talk to about school lunches running out of the advertised food for the last classes of the day?

The campus principal is always the best contact for issues involving their specific school.

Parents are always welcome to visit with the cafeteria manager, but they can also direct concerns to roseann.martin@risd.org - Director Child Nutrition Services for issues involving Child Nutrition.

Each campus manager estimates the amount of food needed for each day based on their historical production records for each menu item and time of year in order to have appropriate quantities available without wasting food. Every effort is made to have enough of the advertised menu item; however, there is no way to predict exactly how many students, teachers, and visitors will choose to eat in the cafeteria on a particular day.

Note: The Child Nutrition supervisor for this campus will contact the manager and review meal planning.

What is RISD's policy on re-entering a home campus after school hours, but before staff members depart for the day? Are all doors to be locked at 3:00 p.m., with no chance of re-entering to retrieve any lost or forgotten items?

In this day and age, it cannot be overstated how important safety and security is at every campus. Maintaining secure facilities can, by definition, be inconvenient to the students and staff who are being kept safe, resulting in a balance that RISD must find.

The expectation is that all of the doors except the front doors are locked during the school day, with restricted, monitored access only through the front doors.

A student or parent entering the building after the end of the school day should enter the building through the front door and check-in with the office. Such entry is not prohibited, but does require the knowledge and assistance of campus personnel, who have end-of-day duties to complete and may not always be available to monitor the front door after-hours.

The district is working with buildings to develop a plan to allow for notification of the office that a student wants to re-enter the building to retrieve a forgotten item.

It is important to note that after the school day is over, most facilities are used for other purposes, and staff have additional duties to complete, so maintaining security remains critical.

Is RISD exploring the possibility of converting its buses to biofuel? If so, is there a timeline for this conversion?

All of the buses that run routes for Richardson ISD belong to Dallas County Schools and these buses have been equipped with technology that has reduced emissions by as much as 95 percent over standards in place ten years ago.

All 2007 model and newer buses have engines that meet or exceed Federal standards and buses older than 2007 have filters installed in the exhaust system that meet these same standards.

This new technology, along with the new ultra-low sulfur diesel (ULSD) that is in use for all diesel vehicles that serve RISD, has lowered the emissions for nitrous oxide (NOX) by 95 percent and particulate matter by 90 percent.

Biodiesel fuel has no better emission results than ULSD and costs 30 to 50 cents per gallon more than ULSD. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has chosen to make ULSD required in this area, so the availability of biodiesel fuel is not as great (in other parts of the country the opposite is true).

With the DFW area being identified as a "Non-attainment Area" in terms of air quality by the EPA, bus emissions is an issue taken very seriously by RISD and its contracted service provider, Dallas County Schools. We will continue to stay abreast of all available technology to make the vehicles used by RISD safe and environmentally friendly.

At what point is it the responsibility of parents to supply supplies to the classrooms, such as sanitizer, antibacterial wipes, erasers and markers for dry boards? Are these not things that should be supplied by the district?

Every campus should be submitting school supply lists annually to central administration for approval.

Items such as sanitizer and antibacterial wipes are an individual teacher's preference and not necessarily something the district asks parents to provide.

Given that, teachers are certainly welcome to request such items from parents or PTA throughout the year, with the understanding these are not core components necessary for instruction, nor should parents feel compelled to provide the items if they feel they are excessive.

Materials necessary for instruction, such as dry erasers and markers, are provided for in each campus budget.

What is the possibility that the calendar will revert back to previous years' schedules with the first semester ending with the start of winter break? Many parents are unhappy with the first semester lasting through the winter break period with exams coming after winter break.

The calendar is different this year because the Texas Legislature passed a law prohibiting districts to begin classes prior to the 4th week of August. This caused RISD, and many other districts, to move their calendars back to account for the later start date. Most school districts opposed the new law, because they felt it's not in the best academic interest of students.

In January of 2007, RISD administration and the Board of Trustees solicited parent input on calendar options through the district newsletter, website and board meetings. The option recommended by RISD staff was adopted, and is the current 2008-09 calendar.

Given the start date constraints, RISD feels the current calendar is best academically for students, for two primary reasons:

First, the current calendar has close to an equal number of days in each semester. Finishing the first semester before winter break would create a substantial imbalance in semester days.

This is important because RISD offers many one semester courses, and imbalanced semesters would be both unfair to students in those courses, and would also make continuity between courses in a sequence difficult.

Second, one of the critical elements of RISD's recent academic success is the district's ability to review performance data for every student throughout the year. This allows each campus to evaluate which students require academic intervention in enough time for them to recover and still be successful.

For this to happen, teachers and campus administrators utilize one professional development day intentionally placed approximately every six weeks for this specific purpose. Scheduling finals prior to winter break would remove RISD's ability to place these days, as all professional development days would have to occur prior to the start of school.

Thus far, the district has received mixed reviews on exams after the winter holiday.

Some parents and staff believe that coming back to school for one week prior to semester exams gives students plenty of time to study and prepare without cramming over the holiday. They also believe that semester exams are removed from the rush prior to the holidays. Others really liked that we closed out one semester prior to the holidays and started fresh in January.

The Board will adopt the 2008-09 calendar in February, and will continue to take staff and community input until their February 11 Regular Meeting. RISD plans to compare exam grades from last year and this year to see if there is a difference.

A handful of other north Texas districts have calendars which complete exams prior to winter break, and parents have questioned whether RISD can do the same.

It's important to note that every district operates under different priorities, community expectations, history and student populations. RISD feels the current calendar (working within the less than ideal parameters required by the legislature) is best academically for students. It's also important to note that some of those same districts have visited RISD to find out what we are doing to produce such excellent student performance.

Is there any thought to eliminating field questions or other questions that great numbers of students miss on benchmark tests so that the resulting grade will better reflect the students' actual understanding of the concepts being taught?

To clarify, field questions are not placed on benchmark tests, only on TAKS tests by the Texas Education Agency. Field questions on TAKS do not count toward the final score, and are a way that TEA can test questions before including them on future tests.

RISD tests students periodically throughout the year to assess how well they are mastering the curriculum. These are called benchmark tests, and count as a portion student's final grade. Benchmark tests are a critical component of RISD's overall academic success as a district, because they allow teachers and administrators to know how well each individual student is learning, and help educators realize which students are falling behind in specific areas so interventions may be implemented.

Benchmark tests may contain some questions of higher rigor, which help educators understand which students have mastered the material to the point where they can apply critical thinking to problem solving.

RISD regularly reviews benchmark tests to determine appropriate rigor and wording. Parents with questions about specific tests or questions are encouraged to speak with their campus principal.

Westwood Junior High offers a test to 6th graders to be able to take Algebra in 7th grade, if they pass the Algebra test with a 90 or better. In the past two years, I have been told that no one has passed the test. Why do we continue to offer this option at a cost to the district and not change the way we teach math in elementary school? Why don't we offer an accelerated math class for 5th and 6th graders so that they have a chance to pass a test like this?

For students who may be ahead of their peers mathematically, it's important to offer options to allow them into more challenging content earlier in their school career.

Westwood is a Math Science Magnet and offers Algebra I to 7th graders who meet the criteria for the course. This includes passing an exam for acceleration of 8th grade mathematics with a passing score of 90+. The exam is 120 questions and covers 7th and 8th grade mathematics (but not algebra).

This is RISD's second year to offer the exam and students have passed the exam, although not as many as the district would like.

The problem is one of logistics, as the exam is offered in December, which means a 6th grade student would be taking a test covering two and half years of mathematics they have not yet covered.

RISD is working on a way to give the test at the end of the year to encourage a higher success rate. The district does offer an accelerated math course in the summer for students who want to

take PreAP 7th grade math and also offers exams for acceleration in the summer, where success rate is better.

With the new revisions of the math TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) the district will be working this summer to move more 7th grade topics into the 6th grade. Pre-AP math starts in the 7th grade in RISD, so advanced math classes are not offered in the elementary grades, other than the REACH program which gives the student extra work in critical thinking essential for success in higher mathematics courses.

With the growing number of students diagnosed with Dyslexia, why does RISD not have a special student service specified for this learning disability, with its own budget for materials, needed programs and qualified teachers to teach the programs?

RISD does have a person whose job description includes addressing the identification, placement, and teaching of students with Dyslexia. The district contact is Nelwyn Shows (nelwyn.shows@risd.org), who is the elementary director of language arts and literacy.

The district currently has four teachers at the elementary level who teach the Alphaphonics Program lessons and two additional teachers who attend CIT meetings and test students.

At the secondary level, we have one teacher at every campus who is trained to screen, teach the curriculum, and participate in CIT meetings. RISD also has a parent support group for parents of Dyslexic students. There is a budget for supplies such as test materials, tapes, and textbooks.

A positive element of the interventions which meet the criteria for dyslexia is that they can be taught by a trained paraprofessional, with monitoring from campus and district personnel.

Why is the district spending extra money to teach bilingual classes? What purpose is served through putting a BP/DP (Behavioral/Developmental) class at a magnet school in terms of students deriving benefit from the specialized curriculum?

Bilingual classes are offered in accordance with Texas law.

“Each school district which has an enrollment of 20 or more limited English proficient students in any language classification in the same grade level districtwide shall offer a bilingual education program. The goal of the bilingual education programs shall be to enable limited English proficient students to become competent in the comprehension, speaking, reading, and composition of the English language through the development of literacy and academic skills in the primary language and English.” This explanation is taken directly from Chapter 89 of the Texas Education Code.

Although behavioral or developmental program students have more challenges than students not in those programs, each and every student is capable of learning. Our mission as a district and as educators is to help each student realize their potential, and behavioral or developmental program students are no different. They absolutely derive benefit from the magnet curriculum, just in different degrees and ways.

In this instance, the principal requested the programs be present at his campus because he recognizes the benefits of having students with diversity on the campus.

Because the nature of a magnet campus includes a central location, it also serves students in surrounding schools to not have to travel farther away from their home campus as is absolutely necessary.

Many districts require testing to get into a magnet school. Why does RISD use a lottery system instead of testing?

Magnets that require testing for entry are usually gifted and talented magnets. None of the RISD magnets are designed as gifted and talented magnets, although all of the opportunities for gifted instruction are available in each of them. Since our magnets have no academic requirements for entry, RISD uses the lottery because there are usually have more applicants than can be accommodated.

Why are my child's grades subject to test scores as opposed a daily average of his work? How does this account for students who may have a bad day on test day?

Secondary grades are based on a combination of daily work, quiz grades, projects and major test grades. RISD has a policy that no grade may count more that 25 percent of a student's six week average.

Academically, the goal of junior high is to prepare students for the high school curriculum, and the goal of high school is to prepare students for college. Students are required to take many tests during junior high and high school, such as semester examinations, benchmark tests, TAKS, PSAT, SAT and ACT just to mention a few. The ability to prepare for and take a test is something that is critical to success in college, and is a primary reason that meaning and value are placed on testing in junior high and high school.

If a student has a bad day on a test, the teacher will usually work in good faith with the student to earn a better grade through extra work, or give the student another opportunity via retest. Many times students must learn to overcome test anxiety. Parents are always free to talk with students' teacher to explain why the student might have experienced a bad test day.

Some parents at my campus have noticed that there are some grade levels and classes in the school with a high number of students, and unacceptable student-teacher ratios. Has this been identified as an issue, if so, where are the students coming from, and what is being done about it?

The state-mandated student-teacher ratio in grades 1 through 4 is 22 to 1. There is no state requirement for grades 5 and 6, but RISD targets a standard ratio of 28-1, and has for a number of years.

It is a very rare circumstance when the district exceeds the 22-1 ratio, and a waiver must be provided to the state explaining why it was exceeded. When this does occur, it's usually when a student moves into a neighborhood, has multiple siblings, and the school may have room for all

except one. Generally, the school agrees that the family needs to stay together in their home school and will exceed a cap to accommodate that.

Sometimes first time fifth-grade parents are surprised when they see their child's class has gotten larger than it was in grades 1-4, but for fifth and sixth grade teachers, it is manageable, appropriate and conducive to academic success.

Why does each student no longer receive their own copy of subject books that are brought home to study from? We were told this year that there is only a class copy of the book. It is difficult when you are trying to go over graded work (especially in Science, Math and Social Studies) and there isn't a reference of how it is being taught or a way to study for upcoming tests.

As technology has evolved over the last two decades, so have instructional materials used in a classroom. Rarely is a textbook the sole source of information anymore, and in many classes, textbooks are a secondary reference. As such, textbooks are now considered just one resource to assist a teacher in teaching the curriculum.

The state provides the content and standards districts are expected to teach, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), so RISD's framework for instruction is the curriculum which is electronically available for every teacher. In this curriculum, various resources are utilized to teach various TEKS and skills. Some of these resources are leveled readers, wall charts, vocabulary cards, handouts, textbooks, etc.

Students are assigned a personal textbook if there is one that is current enough to contain material currently being taught. New textbooks are a substantial expense, which is reimbursed by the state only if districts use a state-adopted text. Problems arise when the state does not adopt textbooks often enough to reflect changes in the TEKS, so districts must devise alternate materials to remain current.

In the case of math, there has not been a new elementary textbook adopted in 12 years, so all of RISD's math textbooks at the K-5 grades are outdated, although the selection process to get a new math textbook is finally underway.

The main focus of this answer is that students and teachers have multiple resources from which to learn and we try to incorporate the best resources to teach a concept. In many cases, the textbook simply may not be the best.

Teachers are very aware of the need to ensure student access to instructional materials over which they are to be evaluated. If you feel your child is being tested on material solely covered in a resource to which he/she does not have adequate access, please clarify the situation with your child's teacher.