Geneva Community Unit School District 304
Office of Learning & Teaching

TO: Dr. Mutchler, Board of Education
FROM: Andy Barrett
RE: Elementary Acceleration and Enrichment Program Review Recommendations
DATE: 1/24/2022

Background

As we have shared via four presentations over the course of the past several months, we have been engaging in discussions over the last several years regarding our elementary Acceleration/Enrichment (AE) program and considering whether the program, as currently designed, is structured in the best way possible for students. During the 2019-2020 school year our elementary AE teachers, elementary administration, and Learning and Teaching department began formal discussions regarding the structure of the AE program and initiated the preliminary stages of a program review. The work of this group progressed during the 19-20 school year but, as with many other issues, moved to the backburner when we were all thrust into an unprecedented circumstance due to the pandemic. In the spring of the 2020-2021 school year this same group of stakeholders re-engaged in this topic with the goals of continuing this program review and making improvements to the elementary AE program. We engaged classroom teachers across all impacted elementary grades and developed a small working group to discuss the topic in greater detail. We presented some preliminary findings to the Board of Education this fall, and below you will find some background information followed by our proposed changes, the rationale for those proposed changes, and some additional structural considerations.

Current Program Structure

The current elementary AE program is designed as a 'replacement program' for the subjects of reading and math. In a replacement program, identified AE students leave their classroom teacher and receive their instruction for these content areas from the AE teacher. This differs from a supplemental program in which students receive the core curriculum from their classroom teacher and are pulled out exclusively for enrichment activities. The daily structure of our current elementary AE program is as follows:

   Third Grade:
        AE Reading: 50 minutes
   Fourth Grade:
        AE Reading: 50 minutes
        AE Math: 60 minutes
   Fifth Grade:
        AE Reading: 50 minutes
        AE Math: 60 minutes

Challenges of our Current Program Structure

Our AE teachers have identified several challenges inherent in the structure of our current elementary AE program, many of which revolve around the most valuable commodity we have in school, time. Specifically, our AE teachers have noted how difficult it is to engage students in rigorous and in-depth discussion and reflection in a fifty-minute session. Additionally, both our AE teachers and our classroom teachers note that the fifty-minute length creates a disjointed learning experience for students (both AE and regular education students) because our classroom-based reading blocks are ninety minutes.

It is also important to note that our AE and classroom teachers identified concerns with our identification process for third grade AE. The Cognitive Achievement Test (CogAT) used in our identification process requires a different administration procedure for primary grade students, and since transitioning to the electronic version of this assessment we have noted that we identify a relatively small amount of students for third grade AE reading (our third grade AE reading sessions only include a handful of students, if any at all). This identification situation further exacerbates our structural challenges. Specifically, the low identification numbers often necessitate that we end up identifying more students via an alternative process in the later grades. Not only does this mean that potential AE students are missing out on AE support (because they are not identified by the start of third grade), but it also means that our AE teachers are devoting a session of their time each day to rather small group of students.

Proposed Program Modifications

Based on our ongoing conversations and the challenges noted above we propose changing the program model for elementary AE. Specifically, we propose eliminating third grade AE reading and reallocating those fifty minutes to fourth and fifth grade AE reading by adding twenty-five minutes to each grade. The proposed model would be structured as follows:

> Fourth Grade:
> > AE Reading: 75 minutes
> > AE Math: 60 minutes
> Fifth Grade:
> > AE Reading: 75 minutes
> > AE Math: 60 minutes

The new seventy-five-minute AE Reading Block would be constructed based upon a literacy workshop model and would (generally) be structured as follows:

> Class Check-In: 5 minutes
> Book Talk/Shared Reading: 10-15 minutes
> Mini-lesson Covering New Concept: 10-15 minutes
> Book Clubs and Student Conferencing: 30-40 minutes
> Collaboration and Reflection: 5-10 minutes

Instructional Rationale

We believe the proposed program modification will benefit AE students in a number of ways. Below you will find a brief summary of those benefits along with some references to supportive academic literature. Specifically, we believe that the additional time in fourth and fifth grade will allow the AE teachers to:

- o implement a more robust literacy workshop model aligned with best practices (Goudvis, Harvey, & Buhrow, 2019);
- o facilitate more in-depth discussions and more opportunities for critical and creative thinking for students (Johnston: 2012);
- o engage students in additional opportunities for written response to text (Walter & Biggs-Tucker, 2020) ;
- o foster opportunities for students to develop skills aligned with our district vision including self-directed learning, communication, collaboration, and critical and adaptive thinking (Biggs-Tucker & Tucker, 2015);
- o conduct more strategic and robust student conferencing (Yates and Nosek, 2018);
- o expand implementation of creative and cross-curricular enrichment activities (Leu et al., 2017; McKee-Waddell, 2015);
- o implement instruction of multimodal literacies (Husbye & Vander Zanden, 2015; Leu et al., 2017);
- o implement additional cross-district student collaboration;
- o and provide connections that assist with middle school transition.

Structural Rationale and Considerations

In addition to the learning benefits for students there are several additional positive outcomes and considerations to note regarding this plan.

Contact Minutes

It is important to note that while this proposed programmatic change shifts AE instructional time to later grades it maintains the exact same amount of learning time for AE reading students over the course of their elementary career.

Reading Block Balance

While this change would greatly improve the balance of time between AE reading and the classroom reading block it would not create a perfect one-to-one match. As such our AE teachers would continue to work with our classroom teachers to plan for AE reading student who will be with their classroom teacher for fifteen minutes of the reading block. Our teachers feel this is a very manageable issue.

Scheduling

The reallocation of AE time will simplify scheduling in our elementary buildings. Development of the elementary building master schedule is a very interconnected process, and each block of AE included in the schedule impacts several other factors. By reducing the overall number of AE blocks from five to four, our principals will have more flexibility in schedule development and our third-grade teachers will not be beholden a specific and disjointed reading block.

Identification and Assessment

As noted above, we currently identify third grade AE reading students by administering an alternative version of the CogAT to our second graders. Not only do we (and the assessment publisher) believe that the primary version is less reliable, but this model also creates a scenario in which we administer the CogAT in an approach that does not follow the publisher's administration guidelines. Making this transition will allow us to administer one version of the CogAT to all third graders, theoretically providing a better assessment experience for our students while also ensuring that our administration procedures are more in-line with the publisher's guidance.

Support for Third Grade

In making such a change, we recognize that our third-grade teachers may now find themselves in a situation where they will be supporting a student in reading who would have historically been receiving fifty minutes of reading instruction from an AE teacher. We are also mindful that there may be parents who may be worried that their third grader might not be challenged in reading due to this change. To that end we have developed a plan to support third grade teachers and their high achieving students. Since our plan calls for expanding AE reading instruction in fourth and fifth grade our AE teachers will be developing and expanding the existing curriculum in those grades. As such, the third grade AE curriculum and resources will be available to our third-grade teachers. Moving forward, our AE teachers plan to group these resources for use by our third grade teachers and serve as a resource for them when/if the classroom teacher feels it is appropriate to challenge one of their students with more advanced materials.

Conclusion

In summary, after multiple years of reflection, evaluation, and collaboration we are proposing a modification to the elementary AE Reading Program that would eliminate the fifty minutes currently provided in third grade and add twenty-five minutes each to fourth and fifth grade. This change would ensure that any AE students receive the same total number of instructional minutes over the course of their elementary career while also creating an environment in with our AE teachers can provide a robust, rigorous, and coherent reading program.