

October 2011

Dear First & Second Grade Parents,

In the past, primary grades at Countryside have differentiated instruction in our reading block. This year we will also be employing similar teaching strategies to our math instruction. Any extra support is a good thing when we are teaching kids how to read more proficiently and excel at high levels in math. We know that to truly accelerate students' learning, we need to increase the amount of time kids are reading or doing math and we need to also increase the intensity of the instruction. One way this is being done is for teachers to collaborate with other certified teachers in the building. This group of Learning Specialists represents reading specialists, special education teachers, and teachers who support our English Language Learners (ELL), in addition to support provided by non-certified staff – all working collaboratively with our highly skilled classroom teachers.

Increasing Reading Proficiency

In the area of reading, essentially teachers and other support staff are combining forces to “push in” to classrooms or grade level teams to assist with small group instruction. The primary teachers have gathered data using MAP tests, Developmental Reading Assessments, and classroom observations to begin this differentiated instructional framework. Our district is using the Response to Intervention (RtI) framework to ensure personalized learning for all students. The differentiation that is in place at Countryside models the RtI framework and we are pleased to be implementing this model again this year.

Because we know that all students are unique and their instructional needs do not remain constant throughout the school year, our team has set up flexible groups that allow for movement as individual students' needs change. Every first and second grade student at Countryside will have their own personal schedule during the primary reading block on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Each day during the reading block, all students will receive small group Guided Reading instruction, small group or individual interventions and also time for independent work. Each component of instruction is designed to create a tailor made program for each student based on their individual needs.

Student progress is monitored and assessed weekly and is shared with each child's home base teacher, making sure that all teachers are aware of individual student progress. The primary teachers meet often as data teams to revisit the most current data available, discuss individual student progress, and make decisions and adjustments in groupings; all focused on meeting the individual needs of all students. Changes are made to student schedules when the intervention is no longer the “right intervention at the right time.”

The primary goal of this differentiation framework is to know each child's individual needs and plan for learning that will accelerate and enrich the learning of all students. Please ask your child's classroom teacher to share your child's schedule at conferences.

Meeting the Needs in Math

Our Every Day Math curriculum is highly effective in providing a strong foundation for math instruction in the district, and we recognize that the manner in which we deliver that instruction ensures that students at every level of proficiency excel at high levels. In recent years the instruction in the intermediate grades (grades 3-5) has expanded to include a component that addresses the needs of students who excel beyond grade level expectations. This year we will also be offering a similar instructional model to our primary grade students.

As with reading instruction, our data tells us that math learners have changing needs and each unit of study can and should be differentiated based on those individual needs. By using unit pretest data, teachers will identify those students in need of acceleration and flexible groups will be formed for all students within the grade level for each unit, with all classroom teachers participating. Similar to the intermediate grades, students identified for this unit acceleration will be presented with lessons that are “compacted” based on proficiency of the skills. The group will then be moved into a similarly compacted set of lessons at the next higher grade level. This will allow these students to prove their understanding of grade level standards, while expanding their exposure of math skills at a higher level. The process will be repeated for each math unit.

This strategy of acceleration has proven to be extremely successful with our upper grade students, and we know that this will provide the additional challenge that some of our primary grade students also need. The practice of pre-testing and determining the flexible groupings for each unit of study will allow opportunities for all students to participate in this process at different times of the year. In addition, for those students who remain in the mainstream groups, classroom teachers are able to plan for instruction in a more focused manner depending on the unit of study and the skills presented throughout the unit.

The primary goal of this differentiation framework, both in reading and math instruction, is to know each child’s individual needs and plan for instruction that will accelerate and enrich the learning of all students. At conferences in a few weeks, teachers will share information (data) specific to your child and he/she will also share how instruction using this Rtl model is ensuring that your child’s individual needs are being met. If you have questions along the way, please feel free to contact any of us.

Sincerely,

First and Second Grade Reading and Math Teachers
Countryside Learning Specialists
Karen Bergman, Principal