

## **Samples: Public School District Comms**

### **OP-ED**

## **Giving students the challenge they need to succeed**

**Dr. Gayle Walkowiak**  
**Executive Director of Teaching and Learning**  
**Robbinsdale Area Schools**

The jury is in: Long-term studies by the U.S. Department of Education have firmly established that academically challenging high school courses are the single greatest predictor of college success.

In response to this overwhelming evidence, Robbinsdale Area Schools has made a concerted effort to increase academic rigor at the high school level and to make that challenging curriculum available to a more diverse student population.

Our strategy includes an intensive focus on our accelerated academic programs, including the Advanced Placement (AP) program at Robbinsdale Armstrong High School.

The district has worked for several years to increase the number of AP courses and AP students at Armstrong, as well as the percentage of AP students from minority and low-income populations, while increasing the number of AP tests taken. In 2008, a generous grant from the Minnesota Department of Education allowed for a rapid expansion of the program as well as more pre-AP offerings at Plymouth Middle School.

More AP students means better test scores. On the SAT, students in AP or Honors English score 59 points higher in critical reading and 58 points higher than average in writing, while students in AP or Honors Math outscore the average on the Math SAT by an average 77 points. The gains are similar for AP and Honors students in the Natural and Social Sciences.

The same grant funded teaching positions and student support for the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program, which serves students who are capable of completing rigorous curriculum but falling short of their potential.

Many AVID students are from low-income or minority families and will be the first in their families to attend college. Their success is key to closing the achievement gap. AVID pulls these students out of less challenging courses and puts them on the college track—acceleration instead of remediation.

At Robbinsdale Cooper High School, the demanding International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program is also expanding rapidly. As with AP, students can earn up to a full year of advance college credit through testing and coursework.

Since 2006, economically disadvantaged students at both high schools have also had the option of participating in Admission Possible, an innovative program designed to prepare them for college entrance and success.

The results of these and other district efforts at increasing academic rigor have been dramatic. The number of AP exams taken at Armstrong has increased from 730 exams in 2006 to 1115 exams in 2010 while passing rates have held steady.

A record 167 AHS students earned the AP Scholar designation this year. Enrollment in Pre-AP and AP courses has increased 75 percent since 2006, AP participation by students in poverty has increased from 5.62 to 10.37 percent and by students of color from 13 to 17 percent of all AP students.

A total of 128 Cooper students took 332 IB exams last year, an all-time high. Thirteen candidates earned the IB Diploma, and Cooper equaled or surpassed the worldwide IB average in six subjects.

Overall, our students' average composite ACT scores have increased to 22.6 out of 36, well above the national average for the eleventh year running. A total of 635 out of 850 seniors took the exam last year, the highest in five years.

When it comes to increasing both academic challenge and performance, our staff and students are rightly proud of their efforts and results. But far from resting on these laurels, we intend to use this progress to fuel even higher achievement and greater success for our students in high school and beyond.



## Media Advisory from Community Relations

4148 Winnetka Avenue North, New Hope, MN 55427-1288

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**MEDIA ADVISORY**  
**January 3, 2011**

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### **Mass singing events connect 5th graders to middle, high schools**

**New Hope, Minnesota**—Fifth graders in Robbinsdale Area Schools will join with district middle and high school choir members for "Building Bridges," two simultaneous choral events on Friday, Jan. 7 at Robbinsdale Middle School (RMS) and Armstrong High School (AHS). The event includes a mass singing of a simple melody performed in canon, performances of one song each by grade 5, middle school and high school students, and a final mass singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

"Choral singing is a powerful tool for cultivating a sense of school spirit and inclusiveness," said Gayle Walkowiak, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning for Robbinsdale Area Schools. "It will help strengthen the sense of identity for fifth grade students to their respective middle and high schools and introduce them to an authentic choral experience."

**WHEN:** Friday January 7, 2011, 10-11 a.m.

**WHERE:** Robbinsdale Middle School auditorium (3730 Toledo Ave N in Robbinsdale); Armstrong High School auditorium, (10635 36<sup>th</sup> Ave N in Plymouth).

**WHO:** Fifth graders from Meadow Lake, Northport, Forest, and Lakeview Elementary Schools join choral students from RMS and Cooper High School at RMS; fifth graders from Spanish Immersion, Noble, Neill, Sonnesyn, and Zachary Lane Elementary Schools join choral students from Plymouth Middle School and Armstrong High School at AHS.

**WHAT:** Mass choral event for district fifth graders with middle school and high school choirs.

**WHY:** To begin building connections between district fifth graders and the schools they will attend.

**VISUALS:** Students in grades 5 through 12 singing together.

For further details, call Jeff Dehler at 763-XXX-XXXX.

## WEB CONTENT

### District chosen as research site for math education study

Robbinsdale Area Schools has been selected as a research site with the University of Minnesota's Response To Intervention (RTI) study in the area of elementary mathematics.

The RTI approach provides a series of increasingly intensive, individualized interventions to students who show signs of learning difficulties. U of M researcher Dr. Matt Burns will work with district Teaching & Learning Specialist Stephanie Skelly to manage research protocols at Northport and Meadow Lake Elementary Schools.

"This is very big news," said Gayle Walkowiak, Executive Director of Teaching & Learning. "It sets us on a straight-arrow path toward excellence in the teaching of elementary mathematics."

At the heart of the district's elementary math education strategy is Guided Math, a structured, practical way of matching math instruction to the diverse individual learners in the classroom. Skelly has been instrumental in promoting the Guided Math concept within the district and in building the U of M partnership.

"Our District Improvement goal is to close the achievement gap," said Skelly. "This goal seems to be resonating with all district staff as we are feeling a collaborative sense of urgency to meet individual student needs like never before. Guided Math will provide a structure for teachers to continue to organize the wonderful resources and expertise for math instruction. Teachers will also have opportunities to team with Specialist Teachers to deliver math instruction to all students in the regular classroom."

## E-NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

### A legacy of kindness and hope at Cooper

The 40<sup>th</sup> reunion of the Robbinsdale Cooper High School Class of 1969 had the earmarks of any class reunion—laughter, shared memories, rekindled friendships. But class member Rose L\_\_\_ heard something else in the conversations around her—a strong desire to give something back to Cooper High School and to the students who now walk the halls they walked in the 1960s.

"Cooper has changed dramatically in recent years," said Rose. "We weren't all affluent, but we could mostly afford the basics, like the school lunch. Now 42 percent of the students at Cooper qualify for free or reduced lunch. Student turnover is 30 percent, and many students arriving at Cooper lack basic literacy skills. Some lack adequate seasonal clothing, prescription eye wear, or other basics to support a strong learning environment. Yet according to Newsweek, Cooper is still one of the top five percent of high schools in the nation."

Rose came up with the idea of doing something as a class to help Cooper students in need. "I called Cooper and spoke with [Cooper secretary]Carolynn K\_\_\_ to see where the greatest need was for donations. She suggested the discretionary fund, which supplies basics like coats, gloves, boots, and food for students and families in need."

Rose and her husband Ted established the Cooper Class of '69 Legacy Project with \$1,000 of their own money. The fund quickly grew as other class members pitched in.

Rose rallies support for the project by rolling out the numbers. "A modest donation brings real results," she said. "\$2.45 provides a lunch and in some cases, the only substantial meal of the day for a student, and \$40.00 provides many seasons of warmth through the purchase of a winter coat."

Many class members have gone beyond writing checks to volunteer their time at the school as mentors, tutors, or volunteer classroom assistants.

"Donations from the Legacy Project have purchased hats, mittens, and boots for students in need," said Heidi C\_\_\_, vice principal of Cooper High School. "The fund is also fulfilling many specific needs, including lunch for the entire year for a student whose family is in extraordinary circumstances and food at Christmastime for a student who is a refugee and a single parent without other support."

For more information or to make a tax-deductible donation to the Cooper Class of 1969 Legacy Fund, contact Heidi C\_\_\_ at (763) XXX-XXXX or [X@rdale.org](mailto:X@rdale.org).