Framework for Instructional Decision Making

INTRODUCTION

The Staff Development Steering Committee of the Morris Hills Regional High School District has developed this Framework for Instructional Decision Making. This Framework is intended to serve as a device which will integrate and extend teaching and learning methodologies within the district. Based on instructional experience, staff development training activities, and educational research, the Instructional Framework outlines what Morris Hills Regional District teachers and administrators consider to be effective instructional practice. This consensus on what is considered "the best" provides for both commonality and latitude for personal strengths, content-related requirements, and for the specific individual needs of students.

By design, such an Instructional Framework must have foundations which are clearly and concisely defined, and must be authoritative in the use of current research to support its substance. It must be comprehensive in scope, so that the decision making strategies are flexible and receptive to a wide variety of instructional applications. Above all, it must have relevance for the community of students whose educational needs it must meet.

In establishing and implementing this Framework for Instructional Decision Making, the Morris Hills Regional District educational community believes that an exemplary program of professional growth and development is being undertaken. This Framework offers the opportunity to build upon the significant skills of the professional staff and the possibility of exploring a wide variety of teaching and learning experiences. This combination of current excellence and tested innovation is intended to invite a broad spectrum of students into the world of more effective learning and individual growth. In addition to applicability in classroom situations, the decision making strategies described apply equally well to administrative choices at both school and district levels. With the establishment of a common language, the Instructional Framework offers the Morris Hills community the opportunity to support and improve communication about their mutual goals and the decisions which implement those goals.

The Staff Development Steering Committee recognizes the strong relationship that exists among instruction, curriculum, and assessment. These three components of learning are seen as vital areas of teaching and our intent is to assist the full actualization of each.

This Framework for Instructional Decision Making is intended to serve as a document which is descriptive rather than prescriptive. The intent is to increase instructional and educational options for teachers, administrators and students. It is not the intent to produce a single standard against which instruction is to be rigidly judged, but rather, to make available a wide variety of options for the multitude of instructional choices which occur during the course of presenting lessons, units, and entire curricula.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

There exists an abundance of programs, strategies, and learning experiences designed to improve classroom instruction and performance. Many of these programs have been investigated, tested, and incorporated into instructional practice by members of the Morris Hills Regional District staff. Some of the research we have embraced includes the work of: J. Robert Hanson, Harvey Silver, and Richard Strong (Thoughtful Education), Robert Marzano and Debra Pickering (Tactics for Learning and Dimensions of Learning), Heidi Hayes Jacobs (Interdisciplinary Curriculum), David Sousa (Brain Research), The Harvard Institute (Learning and the Brain) and Howard Gardner (Multiple Intelligences). In addition there has been significant study in the areas of multi-culturalism, character education, and the applications of technology to learning. It also should be noted that further study and research continues to be a priority and it remains ongoing.

In an effort to provide effective, efficient and integrated educational programs, what is needed is an accurate, practical and sound structure. This provides a fabric upon which the wealth of available ideas
can be tested and woven into a design. By incorporating the research into a design, staff developers, teachers, and administrators will have a plan with which to study, test, select and adapt instructional programs.

In designing the framework for this integration of instructional methods and instructional research, it is essential to define a set of common principles and language. Strategies, models and programs also have a perspective and a philosophy rooted in research. Each strategy, model, or program has a mindset, an alliance with the best current research in education. When they are examined from a broader perspective, they share common themes or beliefs. These commonalities we call our Declaration of Interdependence.

DECLARATION OF INTERDEPENDENCE

1. Teaching and Learning are Goal-Oriented Both learning and teaching are the result of goals individuals set in their efforts to construct meaning, or to help others do so. The attainment of these goals is affected by the theories the individuals holds about learning and the ability to put theory into practice. The process of learning is continuous and dynamic, requiring the attention and flexibility of both teacher and learner. The balance among teacher, student and curriculum within this process determines the quality of the goals attained.

2. Teaching and Learning are Thoughtful Both thought and content are necessary for successful learning. Furthermore, learning in different kinds of educational content areas requires more than one kind of thought process. Teachers create and structure learning environments in which varied modes of thought are applied to their subject disciplines. Students exercise and perfect their abilities to apply these thought processes to a variety of appropriate situations.

3. Teaching and Learning are Stylistic In any moment of genuine learning, some type of learning preferences are at work. Style preferences determine our level of comfort within a particular instructional setting or content area, and often determine the effectiveness with which we learn. Skillful teaching offers strategic approaches to content so that all style preferences are reinforced periodically. Skillful learning incorporates tactics both to utilize style connections and to compensate for style differences.

4. Teaching and Learning are Relational Learning seldom happens in a solitary setting. It represents an interaction between teacher and learner. It also represents an interaction between the learner and the content to be learned, as well as among the learner and his/her fellow learners. In a school setting, collaboration is an essential skill, determining- to a large degree-one's ability to teach or learn. The weight of educational research clearly indicates that establishing personal relationships with content and building inter-relationships within a group of learners are essential components of the teaching-learning process.

5. Teaching and Learning are Artful Teachers attempt to produce "designs for learning"-ways of mobilizing language as well as numbers, pictures, and objects- in order to affect the thoughts and feelings of their students. Teachers define problems, design plans to address these problems, and adapt those plans as the need arises, often on a moment-to- moment basis. Learners respond to these designs with their own unique creativity to maximize the wealth of the experience. In both phases, the teaching-learning process is alive and active; at its best, it represents the artistry of the individual.

6. Teaching and Learning are Ongoing A primary goal of educators must be to instill a desire for life-long learning in students and to nurture that desire in themselves. It is an educator's responsibility to model the qualities of a life-long learner. The encouragement of the ongoing investigation of emerging trends and practices is essential. The motivation of faculty and staff to become expert in their methodology and subject matter, and more cultivated in their interests is in keeping with the belief that teaching and learning are ongoing. The skills, knowledge, and strategies gained through professional development highlight a thoughtful human being who is continually striving to improve depth of understanding and joy of discovery.

The MHRD Framework for Instructional Decision Making uses these programs as a foundation. Each is rooted in well-documented and respected educational research. Each offers flexibility and relevance to
work in real classrooms and real students. The grounding in the reality of teaching and learning which are inherent in these programs and in the Framework which results from their combination and extension is essential to an effective instructional program.

Having accepted the already acquired set of skills, strategies and instructional programs, and adopted the Declaration of Interdependence, district staff members see the remaining task in the development of the Framework to lie in the integration of these with the elements of classic and traditional instructional design: Teachers, Students, Curriculum. For teachers, the framework offers strategies for efficient instruction; for students, tools for effective learning; for the curriculum, courses of study, unit and lesson designs, and assessments consonant with content and student learning style.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

The foregoing Declaration of Interdependence represents a foundation. Teaching and learning occur most effectively when their symbiotic relationship is part of the conscious considerations of those involved. Teachers present instructional strategies that they have learned. Students benefit from not only the wisdom of their teachers and each other, but also from the collective experience of all who have prepared those participants for the classroom setting. Additionally, the tools of instruction continue to increase exponentially. The advent of brain research and multiple intelligences, the rediscovery of whole child education, and the explosion of technology accentuates the necessity for educators to be devoted to lifelong learning. Assessment, too, represents an opportunity for learning. It is more than a testing situation where students show teachers what they know. It is an opportunity for students to apply skills and knowledge to a rubric that is designed to be both evaluative and instructive. Students need to feel empowered to control a portion of their learning and to integrate the skills and knowledge they have accumulated in a meaningful fashion.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Instructional strategies are not new. Plato, Aristotle, and John Steward Mill all had their favorites. Today we hear about Silver, Sousa, Gardner, Strong, Jacobs, and Marzano. These teachers and many more have presented instructional strategies that match the needs of learners. The strategies differ from each other. That is because learners differ in the ways that they learn. Different cultures impose different learning requirements; needs are different. Consequently, no universal, correct strategy exists. Each strategy and its related teaching style has its place. The key to excellence in teaching is the artful matching of instruction, curriculum, and assessment to the learner in the most efficient and effective manner.

An instructional strategy possesses a particular set of steps intended to evoke from learners a specific set of desired behaviors. Instructional strategies are deliberate efforts to vary the mode of presentation in order to represent more appropriately the functions inherent in a particular learning objective. Instructional strategies distribute a balanced effort between the learner and the teacher. Teacher and learner become a team with announced goals and clearly identified procedures for reaching those goals.

The strategies included in this Instructional Framework will facilitate one or more of the four basic learning styles outlined in the Hanson, Silver, Strong’s Teaching, Learning and Curriculum Model. These four styles, developed from the research of Carl Jung and Isabel Meyers Briggs, provide a matrix for analyzing and categorizing teaching and learning behaviors. The styles can be displayed simply in four basic neighborhoods of learning: Mastery, Understanding, Interpersonal, and Self-Expressive Synthesis. By varying strategic approaches to content, teachers design the pathways their students follow in pursuit of a concept. The breadth of perspectives can deliver more students to the same destination, as well as have them arrive with a greater depth of understanding.

A Map of some of the possible strategies within their respective Neighborhoods is shown below. It is understood that strategies for effective, thoughtful education are not limited to those listed here. The matrix is intended to serve as an example of how strategies are employed to serve curricular needs. Innovations in strategies are continually being made and no list of strategies by learning style could
possibly be complete.

LEARNING

As teachers develop strategic approaches to instruction and curriculum that are designed to broaden and deepen student understanding, students must similarly be coached to be responsible for accepting ownership of their learning. They must make a complete effort to maximize their opportunities for success. Understanding the workings of their minds, reflecting upon how they approach challenges, becoming proficient with learning tools, and ethically interacting, as citizens of an educational community are all components of learning.

The infusion of critical thinking skills throughout the curriculum is essential to the establishing and maintaining of a reflective and thoughtful educational institution. The utilization of cooperative learning skills also highlights the need for positive interaction among learners and prepares them for the importance of achieving consensus and making positive contributions to a learning team. Awareness of and skill with technology is important to facilitate learning. Brain research is continually changing our understanding of who we are and how we function. Multiple Intelligences expands our definition of wisdom. Character Education encourages the value of both interpersonal skills and strong self-concept. All of these contribute to a student who accepts responsibility for learning using the tools necessary for success.

It, therefore, becomes the responsibility of the teacher to become acquainted with these areas, so that students may be actively assisted in their educational pursuits. The benefit is twofold as the teacher is constantly placed in the position of being a learner in order to continue to be an effective teacher.

CONSCIOUS CONSIDERATIONS

The rate at which knowledge continues to grow necessitates a shift from a concentration on the singularity of Mastery teaching. Strategies that will enable students and teachers to approach new situations and apply practiced skills to the processing of unfamiliar information are highly desirable. The conscious acknowledgement of a variety of teaching and learning styles, and the necessary integration of curriculum, instruction, and assessment better serve the needs of today's learners and teachers.

Metacognition is the reflective study of how we think. Thinking in order to remember and thinking in order to reason are different exercises. In our contemporary culture, the grasping of concepts is more essential that the retrieval of facts. Learning that leads to the use of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), is one of the required elements of good curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Problem solving and decision-making models instruct students in the strategies that they can best utilize to approach new challenges. It is the role of good teachers to provide these opportunities and to allow students to see their instructor use these skills. A thought-filled classroom in which reflection and examination occur on a regular basis, is essential to the preparation of students and teachers for the work of their lives.

Encouraging students to be creative in their thinking and to engage in intellectual risk-taking is another of our conscious considerations. Metaphorical thinking, prediction, and imagining are among the highest levels of thought. We provide students with a needed service when we encourage them to strengthen these skills.

Infusing and combining of these practices is central to the development of both students and teachers. New styles of thinking do not come effortlessly. We recognize that when we ask students to struggle, we must also acquaint them with the benefits of their efforts.

TECHNOLOGY

The importance of technology has increasingly divided our culture into those who will ride along the crest
of its benefits and those who will sink into obsolescence in its wake. As educators, it is our responsibility
to both know and exploit the benefits of its treasure and to instruct students in the potential of its value to
them. Technology is both a tool and a content area. It does not divide itself easily into quadrants.
Although it is a new medium, it requires the use of traditional skills. Accuracy and attention to detail are
essential to the successful utilization of technology. Analyses of heretofore unwieldy masses of
information are made possible through the aid of advanced technology. Technology helps us to enhance
creativity and expand social possibilities.

Students attain and enhance knowledge through the use of technology. As a teaching aid it reinforces
content standards. As a communication tool, it enhances collaboration and interaction with other
audiences. As a productivity tool, technology promotes creativity and produces authentic assessments.
As a research tool, technology can help students locate, evaluate, and report results. As a problem-
solving and decision-making tool, technology helps students make informed decisions. Technology brings
the real world into the classroom. The development of positive attitudes toward technology that support
life-long learning, collaboration, personal pursuits, and productivity is a key goal.

Teachers benefit from using technology in their planning. With the help of technology, students can bring
the vastest library every compiled into their homes. The educational community is expanded and made
more accessible to all through the aid of technology. In order to help teachers more effectively plan,
implement, and assess, a list of websites is included in the Appendix.

ASSESSING OUTCOMES

Assessment is an integral part of instructional decision making. Along with decisions regarding strategies
and lesson design, teachers must decide how to apply and assess mastery, understanding, analysis, and
creativity as they relate to various learning outcomes. Far from being a separate phase of the instructional
process, assessment is a learning tool that must be integrated into instruction. Assessments should be
congruent with stated instructional objectives and student proficiencies. Both the processes as well as the
products of learning should be measured. Teacher decisions regarding assessment should match the
required student performance task to the intended outcome of instruction. Students should become an
integral part of the assessment process by developing their ability to self-assess their work and by
frequently discussing what is to be assessed and the criteria of that assessment. Assessments should
provide feedback on students' personal growth and progress toward meeting proficiencies. Finally,
assessments should include multiple measures of student achievement.

Traditional assessments have been the mainstay of educators for many years. Paper and pencil tests,
written examinations, essays, multiple-choice questions, etc. continue to serve as effective assessment
instruments. Yet, they cannot give a complete picture of student achievement. The term "alternative
assessment" means the direct examination of student performance on significant tasks that are relevant
to curriculum objectives. Such assessments can focus on process, products, and/or performance and
provide for the measurement of knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes. Alternative assessment is inclusive. It
does not imply that any single evaluative method should be used to the exclusion of others. Instead, it
encourages the use of various assessments that accurately measure learning outcomes. Ideally,
assessments are infused into the daily academic program in addition to their role as culminating activities.
The long-term objective of alternative assessment is to improve student ability to perform the kinds of
activities that will be required of them after high school and to be able to self-evaluate their abilities.

Alternative assessments can be divided into four general categories:

- Performance assessments which are products
- Performance assessments which are behaviors
- Observations, conferences, and interviews
- Portfolios
Any of these assessment types may be prepared in a similar fashion. First, the instructor makes decisions about which objectives (content, processes, attitudes) are to be assessed. Next, the criteria of assessment are determined. Students may participate in this process. Then the teacher decides which form(s) of assessments will provide the most authentic means of measuring the objective. The parameters of the assessment are created as a rubric is devised which translates student performance into the grading system. The rubric may be prepared by the teacher alone or with student input. Students are provided with models of various levels of performance prior to completion of the assessment. Clear lines of communication between teacher and students are established regarding the objectives, criteria, assessment task, and grading rubric. Through assessment, students should become better able to evaluate their own progress toward the achievement of learning objectives. This can be accomplished through assessment by self, peers, and outside evaluators in addition to teacher assessment.

In order to gain a true picture of pupil growth and learning, a variety of assessment devices should be employed. This includes both traditional assessments, alternative assessments. The use of many evaluation tools gives a more accurate determination of what has been learned and measures all aspects of the learning activity. It supports the student learning styles philosophy that is promoted in the district staff development program.