February 19, 2016

Dear Parents of Sixth Grade Students:

As many of you may know, there has been a practice in Council Rock for sixth grade students to participate in an Elementary Performance Assessment (EPA). The purpose of the activity is to assess sixth grade students’ research, presentation, and writing skills. Students are given three days to research their topic, create a visual presentation, write a research paper, and present their research to two teachers.

With any district or school-wide program or assessment, it is a best practice to periodically review its effectiveness. I’m writing this letter to provide an update to parents regarding revisions that have been made to the EPA process.

There were numerous conversations over the last few years regarding both the benefits and drawbacks to our current EPA protocol, and so dialogue began in the summer of 2015 regarding a formal review of our EPA processes. Since the beginning of this school year, input was gathered from elementary principals, sixth grade teachers, curriculum coordinators, literacy specialists, librarians, and eighth grade students. The input included the following critiques of the current EPA model:

- Too much anxiety for sixth grade students,
- Takes up a bulk of instructional time needed for standards aligned ELA curriculum,
- Not consistent with expectations when students complete long-term research projects,
- Not aligned to new standards which call for shorter research projects,
- EPA was initially created to prepare students for high school graduation project which has been discontinued,
- No opportunity for student remediation or improvement.

Overall, a common thread from this input was that the instruction that was provided through the EPA process was vital to students. The research, presentation, and writing skills are being effectively taught, and many skills are valued and applied later in the students’ academic careers. With this feedback, the team working on revising our practices felt that it was necessary to maintain many of our instructional practices in this area, and the team also discussed ideas regarding how to possibly remediate the flaws.
Through many conversations, what emerged was the fact that “practice” EPA activities were taking place at each school. These activities took place after the instruction on research, presentation, and writing skills was provided. In addition, “practice” EPA caused decreased anxiety in children, provided meaningful feedback for remediation, took less time than the “real” EPA, and was conducted over time which mimicked real-life research. Overall, it was agreed that a “practice” EPA was sufficient in assessing students’ skills, and the “real” EPA appeared superfluous and problematic.

Moving forward, the sixth grade research project will be conducted at any time during the school year and has no set time limit except that as determined by the teacher and school librarian. The sixth graders will be required to write a short published paper and create an oral presentation from the research. Then, students will present their research to their classmates and be assessed by the classroom teacher. Students may use any available online tool to present their research including, but not limited to, MovieMaker, PhotoStory, and Glogster. Librarians will continue to teach the same curriculum as was applied to the EPA, and children will be assessed using recently revised rubrics in providing feedback to children regarding their progress on the research, presentation, and writing skills.

Research skills have been shown to be among the most essential skills for success in school and life. In addition, learning research skills through a variety of sources (including technology) will help students manage the explosion of information that continuously comes their way. Our instructional practices will continue to place significant value on research skills. These changes allow the district to provide more standards-based activities that will provide children with more appropriate and meaningful experiences for displaying all that they know and can do with regard to their research skills. The revised process will also allow time for possible remediation to students to make sure that they have these skills as they enter middle school.

I thank you, in advance, for your support of these changes. Please be assured that the team and I believe that they have the best interest of our sixth graders in mind. If you should have any questions, please do not hesitate in contacting me or your child’s teacher.

Respectfully,

Joseph J. MacClay
Director of Elementary Education and Curriculum Services