

# PTA Communications Conference Thematic Discussion Topics December 2019

**Background:** In 2018-19, the PTA renamed the “Press Conference” Committee as the “Communications Conference” Committee with the goal of engaging more deeply with District administration on topics of mutual concern and interest. The 2018-19 PTA guidance to the committee was as follows:

“Please note that we will be focusing on general topics rather than specific questions. Should you have a specific question, please follow the Communications Procedures. If you are having any difficulty receiving an answer to a question, you can let your unit rep know and we will do our best to help.”

For the December 2019 Communications Conference, District administration has taken the list of questions and topics shared and broken them into two categories: discussion topics and individual/factual questions. We hope to have substantive conversations about the discussion topics at the meeting and address the factual questions with brief written answers and links to resources with additional information. This will allow the Committee to focus its time on the most substantive issues.

## Curriculum Topics

### 1. Homework (Elementary volume, Secondary workgroup changes, Posting on Google Classroom)

Last year, a secondary workgroup made recommendations for shifts in homework at the middle and high school level.

This year, teachers from all elementary buildings have been engaging in conversations about alignment of traditional homework with the shifts we are making in our approach to teaching and learning. These discussions are ongoing and will continue to center on providing parents with feedback about their child’s progress on class assignments, quizzes and projects while offering families resources they can utilize at home for additional practice.

Discussion topic: The elementary buildings are working towards a common framework for evaluating the value of assignments with more emphasis on project-based and group work, and less emphasis on skill rehearsal and practice. How can parents participate in this conversation?

### Committee Engagement:

Background: A District initiative to evaluate homework at the secondary level resulted in K-12 Curriculum Coordinators meeting with their departments to identify high-value vs. low-value, drill focused assignments, and evaluate the amount of homework in total students are asked to complete. The work started at the end of the last school year and is ongoing. Principals and teachers at the elementary level also began looking at homework, though not as part of the centralized effort. Therefore, the buildings are at different stages in their work. The goal is to balance the amount of homework so that students are well-prepared but do not feel undue anxiety and stress at a young age.

Committee members discussed the following points:

- The advantages and challenges with optional homework assignments.
- Inconsistencies among teachers/buildings and how all elementary level students will be prepared for the secondary level.
  - It was noted that the elementary and secondary levels are working together to ensure all students are prepared to progress to the middle school level.
- Burnout of students as they progress to higher grades.

It was noted the grade-level Parent Guidance Documents posted on the District website are a valuable resource for parents and students to help understand what is expected at each grade and provide ideas for activities that can be done at home to reinforce the classwork. They can be found on the [Elementary Report Card Information](#) page of the District website. Parents are also encouraged to reach out to their child's teacher and building principal with questions or concerns about the homework strategy.

It was also noted that the District uses a universal screening tool, NWEA, to identify students who may need additional support in the classroom. It is administered three times per year. The data is analyzed and monitored and if any shifts are noted in the scores at the building level, the District can respond appropriately.

Summary of appreciations expressed by the Committee:

- More engaging, fun homework as opposed to "busy work" or the traditional drill-focused assignments.
- A progressive approach towards homework.
- Progressing towards consistency across all schools.
- Test scores are increasing year over year.
- Less stress and pressure while kids are young.

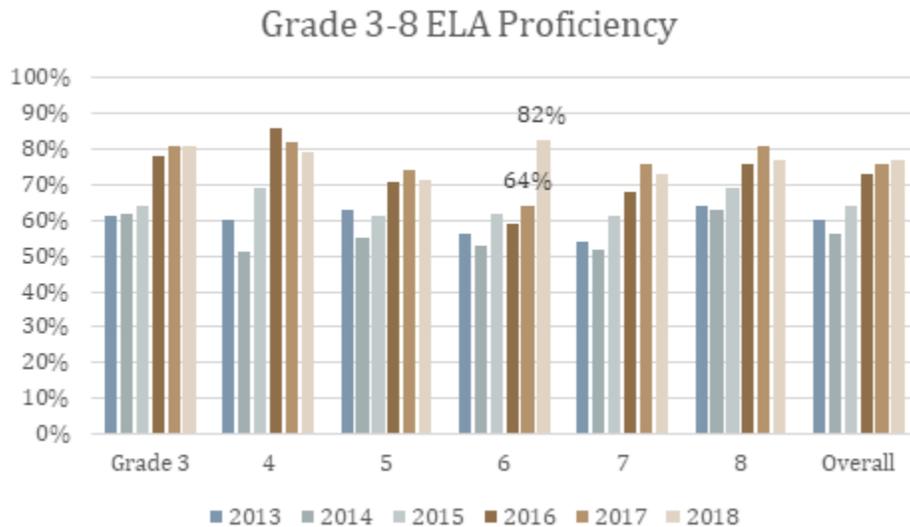
Summary of questions/concerns expressed by the Committee:

- With less homework assignments, will students be prepared for the secondary level?
- Is data recorded on optional homework assignments to determine the number of students choosing to do homework and if struggling students are opting to do the assignments vs. more advanced students?
- It may be more difficult for parents to monitor optional assignments vs. regular homework.

- How and when will the elementary buildings have a unified strategy for homework? Will elementary level students be at different levels when they enter the middle school?
- How can we combat anxiety, pressure and burnout in the older grades?

## 2. ELA Instruction

The District restarted participation in the Teachers College (TC) Reading and Writing Project in 2015. The District has seen English Language Arts (ELA) test scores improve steadily overall.



Discussion Topics: How are grammar, spelling and other skills embedded in the curriculum? Given our diverse community, how are literature selections evolving to be more culturally responsive and include a more diverse range of protagonists?

Committee Engagement:

Background: The District returned to the Teacher’s College Reading and Writing Project a few years ago and engaged in extensive staff development. ELA scores are increasing year over year and each class is starting at a higher level than the class before it, which is an expected result of a strong curriculum program.

It was noted that spelling and grammar is embedded in the curriculum and is tailored to individual student needs. In addition to Teacher’s College, the Foundations program is used in grades K-2. In the middle school, a computer-based program named No Red Ink is being used to teach traditional grammar in a needs-based, individualized manner.

Committee members discussed the following points:

- The importance of grammar skills for strong performance on the SAT/ACT.
- The varying degree of grammar skills at different grade levels.

Summary of appreciations expressed by the Committee:

- Incorporating grammar and spelling into the daily lesson.
- Rising test scores.
- Continuation of the same methods of teaching from elementary level to middle school.

Summary of questions/concerns expressed by the Committee:

- How is grammar taught in the high school? Some high school students are not prepared for the ACT/SAT.
- Are students taught cursive?
- Can Wordly Wise be used more at the elementary and middle school levels?
- Auto spell on Chromebooks may be hindering students from learning to spell.

### **3. Parent Communication (Report Cards, Parent-Teacher Conferences)**

The District has transitioned to elementary standards-based report cards, Teacher Reacher for scheduling conferences, and has a number of other opportunities for parent-teacher communication.

Discussion Topics: Review the varied means of parent-teacher communications. How to use the parent guides to better understand the standards-based report card, where comments may be necessary to amplify the report card, and how best to use the parent-teacher conferences.

Committee Engagement:

Background: The District redesigned the report card to make it more informative; related to the standards and less reliant on comments that may not be as meaningful. The report card is one way of communicating with parents, though there are many others; including email, Remind, course syllabus, Google Classroom, parent portal, and curriculum celebrations as other means of communicating with parents.

It was noted that there will be an evening parent-teacher conference session in the spring.

Committee members discussed the following points:

- The five-minute timeframe for conferences at the secondary level can be challenging.
- Topics for Curriculum Night.

Summary of appreciations expressed by the Committee:

- Communication has improved over the last few years.
- Teacher Reacher has been helpful.
- There is value in face to face conversations.
- Teachers are easily accessible and responsive.
- Satisfaction expressed for current levels of communication.

Summary of questions/concerns expressed by the Committee:

- Support expressed for more comments by the teachers.
- More communication requested at the secondary level.
- More evening conference sessions should be made available.
- Course syllabuses at the middle and high schools would be helpful.
- Student access to the portal would be helpful.

*Note from District: Students in grades 8-12 will have individual access to the portal in early 2020.*

#### **4. Instructional Technology - Best practices and future directions**

The District has become an innovator in the use of instructional technology. Over the past several years, successful pilot projects have become District-wide models. At the secondary level, students are provided with a District-issued Chromebook.

Discussion Topic -- How has instructional technology “amplified” instruction and facilitated homework? How can parents and educators partner to place reasonable limits on “screen-time” for young people?

Committee Engagement:

Background: Over the last five years, the District has made a lot of investments in security, office and classroom technology. Many technologies have been piloted and only those that amplify the classroom learning are rolled out.

Committee members discussed the following points:

- Technology has been a tremendous support for students with special needs.
- The ability to block games on the Chromebooks. (The District uses GoGuardian to block websites.)
- The amount of screen time for students and the importance of balance and face-to-face interactions.

Summary of appreciations expressed by the Committee:

- Chromebooks have been an advantage.
- Technology is being infused into the curriculum in thoughtful and constructive ways when it amplifies the lesson.
- Students need to be prepared for the future and should be proficient in new technologies.

Summary of questions/concerns expressed by the Committee:

- Weak writing skills due to Chromebook use.
- Need to balance time spent on Chromebooks with face to face interactions, real-world learning and writing lessons.
- Technology can be a “crutch” with Google Translate and auto spell check.

# Special Education Topics

## 1. ICT Pilot

The District currently is piloting an Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) model in the upper elementary grades as a transition to the ICT model that is used in middle school.

Discussion Topic - What have we observed so far as the strengths and challenges of this pilot? How will we evaluate the pilot at the end of the year? Would it be appropriate in earlier grades? Does this impact future planning for the self-contained classroom?

### Committee Engagement:

Background: Integrated Co-Teaching has been implemented at the middle school for some time. The District has been working on K-12 alignment, and therefore is piloting the program in the higher grades at the elementary level to ease the transition to middle school. There is a lot of professional development taking place, including in-class coaching to develop unique skills required for co-teaching. In the spring, the program will be evaluated thoroughly.

### Committee Engagement:

- Overall support expressed for expanding the program.
- Co-teaching benefits all students in the classroom.
- What is the profile of a student selected for an ICT classroom?
- The transition of middle school students in an ICT classroom to the high school.

### Summary of appreciations expressed by the Committee:

- ICT is a great model if the teachers are well matched.
- Overall support expressed for the program.

### Summary of questions/concerns expressed by the Committee:

- What is the timeframe to fully implement the program to all grades?
- How does selection for the ICT program work and can it be requested for students with IEPs?
- How will students in the ICT program transition successfully to the high school? What would a rollout of the program to the high school look like?

# PTA Communications Conference

## Individual Questions

### December 2019

#### Curriculum Related Questions

- Is it possible to familiarize students with the BOCES program as early as 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade so that they know that it is an option for them when they get to 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade? For some students, waiting until 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade to learn of the program may be too late.

District Response:

We have made several improvements to our 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade transition planning process and can consider how to incorporate BOCES offerings into that process.

- What rules are in place for a student on a sports team requiring after school practice on the same day said student is also asked to attend extra help?

District Response:

Students needing to balance interscholastic sports with academics are encouraged to speak to their teachers/coaches for assistance.

- There is concern that substitute teachers are often ill-prepared for the assigned subject/class that they are charged with teaching. What procedures are in place to ensure that students receive appropriate lesson plans in the absence of their regular teacher?

District Response:

Permanent substitute teachers are employed at every building to maintain a consistent level of instruction during a teacher's absence, and specific procedures related to substitute teachers are handled at the building level. If a parent has an issue related to a substitute teacher, they should contact the building principal.

- How is class size currently dictated? Is the number of students per class mandated by our district or by state law? How does Syosset compare to our neighboring districts in this area? Is there any possibility of reexamining the current size cap in an effort to make class sizes smaller at all grade levels?

District Response:

Class size is set by Board resolution and has remained consistent since 1990.

- For District wide or high school wide events that take place in the evening, people need to utilize Stillwell Fields for parking. Because the fields are unlit, it feels extremely unsafe. Is it possible for the district to coordinate with the town to have the lights on during these times for safety?

District Response:

The Stillwell Fields parking lot is owned by Nassau County and maintained by the Town of Oyster Bay. Any requests related to the lot should be directed to the Town.

Parks Department: <http://oysterbaytown.com/departments/parks/>

Department of Public Safety: <http://oysterbaytown.com/departments/public-safety/>

## Special Education Questions

- Is there a list of resources available to parents via the OPWDD (Office for People with Developmental Disabilities) that assists with the cumbersome amount of paperwork required by families to properly advocate for their children? If there is not, can one be added?

District Response:

Assistance with OPWDD application is available at: <http://parenttoparentnys.org>

OPWDD application information is available at:

[https://opwdd.ny.gov/opwdd\\_services\\_supports/introduction](https://opwdd.ny.gov/opwdd_services_supports/introduction)

District social workers are also available to assist parents in completing the application process.

- What steps need to be taken to make the necessary testing accommodations for students with IEP's for the ACT and SAT exams? When should these accommodations be noted/created?

District Response:

Testing accommodations listed on a student's IEP are based on collected data including the student's performance in class. Testing accommodations are not provided for specific examinations. It is expected that if a student's present levels of performance indicate the need for a testing accommodation, that accommodation would be used for all tests taken by the student. Only the CSE can create testing accommodations to be included in a student's IEP.

## Transportation Questions

- At what age/grade level is a bus driver instructed to allow a student to exit the bus without an adult (a guardian) there to receive them?

District Response:

As indicated in PTA's *Elementary School Parent Guide*, all but Kindergarten students are allowed to be released without an adult to receive them. Parents/Guardians are responsible for getting their child to and from the bus stop.

- While the addition of camera surveillance on our buses is extremely progressive and appreciated, there is still a concern with how incidents are handled in "real time" without a physical bus monitor available. Specifically, in the case of a medical emergency affecting either student or driver what can be done to contain and attend to the situation? Under what circumstances would the district consider hiring bus monitors?

District Response:

Drivers are in contact with Huntington Coach Dispatchers via a two-way radio. In the event of an emergency drivers are instructed to call 911. The district uses bus monitors in specific instances including when required by an IEP or 504 plan.

- Some middle school and high school students seem to be experiencing confusion when it comes to late buses. Many of these students are unsure of which bus to take and exactly where it will drop them off. What is the process for late bus drop off and where can the students find out which bus is best to take, where it is located and where they will be dropped off? Can the lists of routes be posted on the district website so that parents can be familiar with where their children are going?

District Response:

Due to safety concerns the district does not post bus routes on its website. The routes are posted in each of the secondary schools (HS routes are posted outside main office and in the student lobby, HBT routes are posted in the cafeteria, and South Woods routes are posted in the lobby.) For the next school year, the Transportation department is working on a way to bring more clarity to the late bus routes. If parents have any questions regarding their late bus routes, they can call transportation or the school.

- Given the increase in children operating on high levels of generalized and social anxiety what are teacher aides and lunch aides doing to foster positive socialization amongst peers? Would the district consider supplemental education for our recess aides to better equip them to handle student issues?

District Response:

Our school lunch/recess monitors, teacher aides, and teacher assistants are trained throughout the school year on using positive behavioral interventions and supports. The intent of which is to equip our staff with the knowledge, the resources, and the understanding of how to prevent concerning behaviors through research-based strategies that support students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs. This training is a person-centered, student-strengths based approach that focuses on treating students with respect and dignity. Monitors, aides, and assistants are trained on how to watch for and listen carefully to understand the behaviors and emotions the students are communicating. With this understanding, these staff members are educated on the importance of using positive reinforcement strategies as well as steps

they should take to fix the “environment” that may be triggering concerning behaviors. The monitors, aides, and assistants are also apprised of the protocol for seeking teacher and building principal intervention and support for advice and direction on addressing concerning behaviors as well as promoting positive social interactions.

- The District educates and cautions our students about proper use of social media. Both Instagram and Facebook are blocked on District Wi-Fi and yet they are utilized by many of our clubs and sports as a means of communication. This sends mixed messages to our students. As parents we try to minimize screen time and may wish to prohibit use of these sites, but our children are instructed to use them repeatedly. Can the district prohibit staff use of Instagram and Facebook for communication purposes and instead utilize a program such as Google Classroom?

District Response: Staff members often use multiple methods of communication to satisfy all student/parental preferences, and many groups have requested information via social media. A student or parent may request an alternate form of communication if not already available should they prefer not to use social media.

- Syosset High School holds Senior Prom on a Friday night. Many high schools locally and across Long Island have changed their Senior Prom to a weeknight and students are expected in school the next day for either graduation rehearsal, graduation or some other required event. They have done this for the safety of their students. Would Syosset High School consider moving their prom to a weeknight with an attendance required activity the next day for the safety of the students? Additionally, can the next venue for the prom be more local to our community?

District Response:

Prom is a student government activity. Questions can be directed to the SHS administration.

# PTA Communications Conference

## Group Process Activity

### December 2019

Group Process Activities allow committee members to give concise feedback on topics discussed. Committee members were encouraged to share Exclamation Points (Appreciations) and Questions (Concerns) they had regarding each topic.

## Homework

### Exclamation Point Feedback

- Homework is important and serves a purpose.
- Rules are evolving regarding homework.
- Growing toward consistency slowly across the board.
- Thinking outside the box in terms of homework is a positive.
- No need for 20 math problems – more fun math practice should be optional
- Test scores up.
- Love less stress when they are young.
- Kid being a kid! Less stress/pressure. “Smart” homework, not busy work.
- Creative/Fun way to learn vs. “boring”/traditional.
- Concerned not enough homework in middle school what happens when they get to high school.
- Children should have “real” homework – Spelling, math, cursive.
- Restructuring homework is a good plan; it will take time to bring all the schools to a similar level by gradually increasing by grades/schools.

### Questions

- With “optional” homework – has anyone looked at the numbers to see the percentage of students who are doing the homework?
- Do teachers keep track of who does and doesn’t do the optional homework? If a student is not doing well and not doing the optional homework, the issue can be addressed.
- How does a teacher address a working parent or a more traditional parent who prefers specific homework not “optional” homework that they need to be on top of?
- Are the 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers communicating with the middle school 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers specifically?
- Can the optional math homework be requested?
- What can we do to combat anxiety, pressure and burnout in the older grades?
- Will all schools eventually follow the same plan?
- Will the units be unified with homework? If so, is there a goal date?
- Is there a homework fix to writing, grammar and spelling?
- How to make it consistent across all elementary schools?

- If they are not doing homework in the younger grades, what prepares them for the workload, regardless of how it is adjusted in the older grades?
- It is easy to check if your child did a math sheet however, logging into Google every night to check her progress is difficult.

## ELA/Grammar

### Exclamation Point Feedback

- Makes sense to teach it. Kids need to learn these important skills.
- Middle schools following same curriculum of ELA/grammar and context is a great way to learn.
- Grammar/spelling changes within district.
- Teachers college/phonics program.
- Test scores improving since 2015 in ELA – some parents were surprised by this.
- Didn't know about the grammar in elementary then most parents don't know.
- Like idea of incorporating grammar, punctuation, spelling into daily lesson/passage.
- Instituting programs at elementary level.

### Questions

- Needs to be ongoing and built upon.
- Can't all be taught in upper grades.
- Where are we seeing this at HS level?
- Are kids prepared for actual formatted test i.e. ACT/SAT utilizing these skills, or do they need refreshers/costly outside review classes?
- There should be follow up to confirm the teachers are really focusing on individual children's English needs and not letting it slide.
- Cursive – can children learn how to sign their name?
- Still think “back to basics” needed – Wordly Wise is a great tool, would like to see elementary and middle schools use it.
- Although Wordly Wise is a great program is there is enough focus on grammar and spelling? The concern is having more focus on Chromebook where the kids can easily correct spelling without learning or absorbing the correction.
- How can grammar better be incorporated in middle and high schools?
- How are you going to “catchup” the kids who fall between the transitions from the old programs to the new programs?

## Parent Communication

### Exclamation Point Feedback

- Communication has improved over the years.
- Seems like each teacher/school/grade has its own system but communication is happening if extra time or info is needed it is easily accessible.
- Teacher Reacher is great! Teachers are very responsive and helpful.
- New report card – no comments more focus on standards and meeting standards.
- Teacher communication should be ongoing not just on conference days.
- There seems to be very little communication between the school and how your child is doing individually.

- Teachers communication is minimum but works fine.
- As a parent you need to be proactive if you need anything an email is the only way of communication.
- There is a value in face to face communication.
- Very satisfied with parent communication we have ample resources.
- I'm reasonably happy with the level of communication. I like the remind app notifications about upcoming games and tests. I need to look at google classroom more.

### Questions

- HS teachers need more comments to choose from on report cards.
- Interim/progress reports really do not say much. Not sure they serve much purpose as they stand. Maybe they need to re-designed.
- Can someone guide newbies on how to schedule the communication for secondary level?
- Would like comments from teachers as it helps to tell the whole story.
- Can the teacher write out a summary on the students?
- More evening parent teacher conferences wanted.
- How can progress reports be more valuable?
- Can you require every middle and high school teacher to have a course syllabus? This will help both parent and student.
- Students in middle and high schools need access to the portal because teachers are telling students to check it.

## Technology

### Exclamation Point Feedback

- Chromebooks are a big plus.
- Technology is being infused into the curriculum in thoughtful and constructive ways.
- Balance technology with face to face.
- More advanced the better prepared for the future they will be.
- Technology being used when it improves the lesson i.e. Unity example.
- Kids can't write due to screens.
- Great that the kids are up to date on the new technology and all its positive uses.
- Happy that the district is taking an approach where technology is used when it amplifies the task.

### Questions

- Need to be able to hook up Chromebooks to home printer- that is a downside.
- Too much time on Chromebook – kids have no physical writing skills: handwriting, hand strength, cursive, etc.
- School should not have to reduce screen time for academics to give kids more screen time for games/social networking?
- Block access to games that are a distraction.
- What is too much screen time in elementary school?
- Worry that technology can be too much of a “crutch” i.e. Google translator and spelling. These are great aids, but not sure kids are learning skills they need at times.

- How are students supposed to write out a check or complete a form if they can't write, read cursive or sign their name?
- Be sure to maintain balance between digital and real-world learning.

## **Special Education – ICT Pilot**

### **Exclamation Point Feedback**

- ICT is a great model if the two teachers are well matched.
- Slowly executing pilot program has been successful thus far.
- Integrated co-teaching 1-5<sup>th</sup> grade 8-9<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Great program – love it!

### **Questions**

- How long will it take to fully expand to all grades? Is that the plan?
- Is there any way for those with IEP's to request the program?
- Can this model be tested on more grades next year?
- How will those in middle school transition into high school successfully if in a co-teaching class now?
- What will the rollout of ICT in HS look like?
- How will those who don't have IEP but need an extra teacher get selected?
- How is it decided which classes use ICT?
- What is the profile of a student who would benefit from co-teachers?
- How can a child without an IEP be added to a co-teaching class?