

Report on the Addition of a 7th and 8th Grade to HCCPS

This report is the result of more than a year's effort to gather information from faculty, staff, parents and past students, to analyze that information and to make decisions regarding the addition of a 7/8 program at Hilltown. As the board undertook this review initially, the Coordinators were asked to gather input from all these parties and to compile that information in a report to the Board, which was done. (See attached document.) A committee from the board then took that report, identified additional pieces of information that were still needed, and conducted several interviews of current Prisms program teachers as well as the Education, Administration and Community Coordinators to supplement the information in the report. The board then devoted a retreat meeting in the fall of 2006 to discussing the reports, and to developing a set of recommendations regarding the continuation of the 7/8 program at Hilltown. This report outlines those recommendations.

The Board of Trustees believes that the inclusion of a 7/8 classroom furthers the mission of the school and enthusiastically recommends the continuation of a 7/8 classroom at Hilltown. Some of the reasons include the following:

- This 7/8 classroom functions in a way unlike many other existing K-8, 7/8 (junior high) or 6/7/8 (middle school) programs. One important way is that because the class is self-contained, there's the option for the schedule to be flexible and responsive to the teachers and students' interests and curiosity, leading to potential exploration of an unexpected topic that comes up;
- Also, because the class is self-contained, it allows teachers and students to work together in a productive way to learn and practice conflict resolution and negotiation skills that are invaluable;
- The approach used in the Prisms classroom emphasizes integration of subject-area content around a central theme developing a sense of connection and relevance for students in the material they are learning;
- The 7th/8th grade at Hilltown places students and teachers together for two years, giving both the opportunity to develop a sense of trust and familiarity with each other. This basis of trust is vital to an effective educational experience and is invaluable particularly for this age group;
- Students' experience in this classroom culminates in the creation and presentation of an 8th grade project. This "mini independent study" gives students an opportunity to develop knowledge and expertise in an area of their own interest, prior to moving on to high school. It not only provides a valuable learning experience for students, but is a worthwhile culminating experience to their time at Hilltown;
- Because the 7/8 classroom is nested within a K-8 school, the students are placed in a leadership role within the school. They have the opportunity to both work with and be a role model for younger students within the school. This is of benefit to both the younger students as well as the 7th and 8th grade students;

- The majority of students who enter the Prisms classroom have attended Hilltown for at least a year, and are therefore familiar with each other and with the community values and norms of the school. This base of students helps set the tone for new incoming students who have not had that same experience.

The Board of Trustees offers the following recommendations for further analysis, work and/or discussion. these recommendations are to be reviewed and delegated to the appropriate committees, councils or people within Hilltown for next steps.

1. *Create a clear and coherent description of those elements that are considered integral to the curriculum and approach in the Prisms.*

Because of the relative newness and small size of this classroom, the contributions of each of the Prisms teachers have been instrumental to the design, evolution and success of this program. However, there will come a time when any of these teachers will either leave the positions or retire. In that event, their replacements will need to be hired. We want to be able to allow incoming teachers the room to personalize their approach to teaching according to their own strengths and abilities yet not compromise key elements of the 7/8 experience at Hilltown. Therefore, the Board of Trustees assigns the Education Coordinator to designate a committee from the Education Domain to create a clear description of the Prisms program. This description will be put in writing, to provide guidance to future decisions about the extent to which the program can be adapted to a new teacher's strengths/interests and where it can/should not be adapted.

2. *Examine the structures within the school that impede or promote the integration of the Prisms classroom with lower grades classrooms towards the goal of strengthening this integration.*

Although HCCPS considers itself one school -- not a separate elementary and middle school -- the information gathered for the creation of this report pointed toward some structures within the school that either helped or hindered the unification of the K-8 program. These included things such as: scheduling of atelier, music and movement, and computer classes; the structure of lunch times; or the frequency with which teachers of lower grades and Prisms initiated cooperative work with each other. The Board of Trustees recommends that: 1) The Ed Domain undertake an analysis be done of the structures that are in place within the school that help or impede the integration of the Prisms classroom with the lower grades. There will be an interim update made to the BOT in Dec 07. This full process is to be complete no later than the end of the '08 school year. The resulting analysis will be in a descriptive statement that captures where the school is at this point in its efforts to fully integrate the K-8 approach and recommendations to further enhance the integration.

- 3. Consider ways to encourage 7th and 8th grade students to model desired behaviors to younger students.*

While older students can often model leadership skills and provide mentorship for younger students, they can also model unwanted behaviors as well. The school has clearly come to an understanding that rules and policies cannot and should not be “one size fits all” when considering the range of needs in kindergarten to 8th grade. However, there may need to be some ongoing staff discussion about how to best encourage the modeling of desired behaviors and to discourage the modeling of unwanted behaviors, and how as a staff to respond to various situations that may and do arise.