

**BELMONT PUBLIC SCHOOLS
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TO: Dr. Thomas S. Kingston
Interim Superintendent

DATE: May 18, 2012

FROM: Deborah McDevitt,
Director of Social Studies

RE: Changes to 8th grade Social Studies
Curriculum

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Assistant Superintendent

Proposal: Expand the English writing portfolio into an interdisciplinary Humanities portfolio that showcases student mastery of both the Common Core and the Massachusetts Social Studies Frameworks. This will require removing History Day from the Social Studies curriculum and moving it to a voluntary after school club.

Opportunities:

- Fully teach and assess the reading, research and writing skills required by the Common Core
- Multiple additional opportunities to measure student growth in reading, writing and research throughout the year
- Expand the depth and breadth of student content knowledge designated by the Massachusetts Social Studies Frameworks
- Strengthen interdisciplinary connections - especially around reading and writing skills
- Creation of an after school academic club for students interested in competing in History Day

Rationale: This year, the Social Studies department has been using meeting time to implement the 2011 Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy, which include the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. [see attached]. As part of this process, we assessed our curriculum to determine where we are meeting the standards and identified areas of opportunity for growth and further development. We found that we expected students to use many of the identified skills, but we were not explicitly teaching and assessing student mastery of many of them. In addition, as we compared what we were teaching to the Massachusetts Social Studies Frameworks [see attached], it also became clear that there were areas where we needed to go into more depth on certain topics.

As we worked to align our curriculum, it became clear that one of our greatest obstacles in meeting the new requirements was the extent of learning time spent on History Day. History Day is part of a national contest for which students create theme-based projects on an historical topic of their own choosing. Students conduct research, draw conclusions, develop an argument and then present their work in the form of a paper, exhibit, performance or documentary. On average students were spending 50 out of 180 class days and an additional month of homework time working on their History Day project. While the wide range of topics and mediums students can use to present their findings can be motivating for students, it also presents a challenge for teachers who need to explicitly teach and assess the skills required by the Common Core. For example, a student who chooses to write a paper will learn and master some of the required skills, while a student who creates a

documentary will learn and master others. Given the large amount of time required to execute this project well, there is little time remaining to fill in the gaps in student learning.

In the last two years, attempts have been made to modify History Day in order to address these challenges. For instance, we started the process later in the year so that students would have developed stronger research and writing skills before beginning the project, and we limited project topics to those directly related to the course so that students would have a greater depth of historical knowledge on which to draw when choosing and analyzing their topic. We also streamlined the process so it would require fewer class days. Even with these changes, we are still challenged to fulfill the requirements of the Common Core and Massachusetts Social Studies Frameworks with History Day as part of our curriculum.

We propose expanding the existing English writing portfolio into an interdisciplinary Humanities portfolio that showcases student mastery of both the Common Core and the Massachusetts Social Studies Frameworks. This will enable us to fully teach and assess the reading, research and writing skills required by the Common Core as well as expand the depth and breadth of our study of content knowledge and themes as designated by the Massachusetts Social Studies Frameworks. Additionally, teachers will have multiple opportunities to measure student growth in reading, writing and research throughout the year, rather than one major assignment due in the middle of the year. Furthermore, this change will also strengthen interdisciplinary connections - especially around reading and writing skills.

For students who are interested in participating in History Day, we propose moving it to a voluntary after school club staffed by knowledgeable personnel. Students will still be prepared to compete at the regional and national levels. We researched other local middle schools with large, successful History Day programs and found that even after moving to an after school club format, Somerville continues to have a very competitive program, sending students to the national competition every year (9 students this year alone). This proposed change to the grade 8 curriculum will ensure that all 8th grade students master all the curriculum standards while continuing to provide an opportunity for students to participate in the History Day competition.

Examples of Social Studies assignments for the Humanities Portfolio

Propaganda Broadside

Project description: Students will create a broadside persuading colonists to support either the patriot or loyalist cause during the American Revolution. Students will use primary sources provided by instructors to research both perspectives.

- **Writing Standards**
- Introduce claim(s) about a topic or issue, acknowledge and distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically.
- Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant, accurate data and evidence that demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text, using credible sources.
- Use words, phrases, and clauses to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.
- Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.
- **Reading Standards**
- Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).
- Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.
- Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

Government In Action

Project description: Students will search for modern day examples of the three branches of the federal government exercising their Constitutional authority. Students will summarize and analyze the contents of the article and then state how the government's actions are Constitutional powers.

- **Writing Standards**
- Introduce a topic clearly, previewing what is to follow; organize ideas, concepts, and information into broader categories as appropriate to achieving purpose; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., charts, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.
- Use appropriate and varied transitions to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts.
- Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.
- Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone.
- Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented.
- **Reading Standards**
- Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
- Identify key steps in a text's description of a process related to history/social studies (e.g., how a bill becomes law, how interest rates are raised or lowered).
- Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.

Reform Project

Project description: Following a study of 19th century reform movements, students select a modern day issue that they believe needs to be reformed. Students conduct research and create a project of their choosing that uses tactics similar to those used by 19th century reformers in an attempt to persuade their classmates to take action.

- **Writing Standards**
- Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas clearly and efficiently.

- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.
- Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research
- **Reading Standards**
- Describe how a text presents information (e.g., sequentially, comparatively, causally).
- Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

Civil War Photo Analysis

Project description: Students select, at random, a unique photograph from the Civil War era. Students will conduct research focused around their photograph reflecting important aspects of the Civil War and then produce a creative or thesis-based writing assignment based on their research.

- **Writing Standards**
- Develop the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples.
- **Reading Standards**
- Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

Throughout the year with all 4 projects:

- **Writing Standards**
- Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.
- Write routinely over shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.
- **Reading Standards**
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.