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## Parent Update – October 16, 2007

### From Dr. Stella – Superintendent of Schools

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Dear Members of the Beecher Community:

#### ***I'm heading to China!***

You may recall, in my introductory message in the *Parent's Guide to the Curriculum*, I stated that I want to work with the staff and community in transforming Beecher Road School into a 21<sup>st</sup> century model of education. To do that, we need to think internationally. As a concrete step in promoting the importance of global awareness and establishing global connections for the Woodbridge School District, I will be traveling to China next month as part of a Connecticut sponsored state delegation of 15 superintendents. The goal of the group is to learn more about the Chinese education system. My immediate objective is to establish a **sister school** relationship that will lead to benefits for us.

Each member of our group will be paired with an individual Chinese school. I will spend a minimum of three days at my assigned sister school where I will spend time researching the school's programs and methods, building relations, and assessing ways for *Beecher Road School* to interact with our new sister school.

Before I leave, I will be meeting with the students at BRS to tell them of my trip, and to ask them what type of information they would like me to bring back as a result of my visit.

#### ***International "Global Knowledge Communities" project is launched at BRS***

In another Chinese/American project, earlier this month two grade six classes at BRS began what will be a two-month online collaboration with students in Hong Kong. In this student-to-student project, the students will be gathering and sharing information about *Life in a Global Economy*. The expectation is that by the end of this school year all sixth grade classes will have participated in this project.

The *Global Knowledge Communities* (GKC) project was piloted successfully last spring on a regional level with the involvement of the Bethany and Orange school districts. The unit of study used then dealt with *global warming*. During the summer, school staff members worked to design a new unit of research that will be used to collaborate with children in Hong Kong.

The *GKC* project is a culminating activity for grade six students at BRS. Students will be expected to apply skills accumulated across the curriculum since kindergarten; some of these skills include scientific inquiry, writing in content areas, using technological tools for gathering and analyzing data, and effective presentation.

**Some people ask:** *How is the Hong Kong-based Global Knowledge Communities project mentioned above different from our new China sister-schools initiative?*

With Hong Kong, there is a computer-based, student-to-student *virtual connection*. Hong Kong is very different, historically and culturally, from Mainland China. Children there speak English. Woodbridge will seek to have additional virtual sites in other countries, such as Singapore, Israel, England, and Latin American countries.

The *sister-school* program focuses more on educator-to-educator interaction to benefit the school. The state of Connecticut has had economic and educational relations with Shandong province since the 1980's. The *State Department of Education* has high-level contacts with the Education Department in Shandong. Many Connecticut school districts participate in this program. I will be traveling with an official state delegation and will work to do the same for us.

#### ***Class size plays a key role in teaching and learning***

The *Class Size Task Force* recommendations, adopted by the Board of Education in 1997, state the following:

- Grades K-3            17 students with a maximum of 19 per class
- Grades 4-6            19 students with a maximum of 21 per Class

With School Board support and budget support from the Boards of Selectmen and Finance, class size has improved at BRS for the 2007-2008 school year. According to the official October 1 enrollment figures, all classes at BRS fell within these recommendations with the exception of one fourth-grade class at 22, four fifth-grade classes have 22, and two sixth-grade classes have enrollments of 23. The multi-age program has an average class size of 18. As we prepare the 2008-2009 budget requests, class size recommendations will be taken into consideration.

### ***The Connecticut Mastery Test results point out many strengths and some weaknesses***

Last spring, students in grades three through six took the *Connecticut Mastery Test* (CMT). The CMT assesses three major curriculum areas: reading, writing and mathematics.

In looking at the CMT results, the most significant area to examine is a school's exiting grade. At BRS, that's grade six. Those scores represent a compilation of all the work that has been done in all previous grades. I am extremely pleased with last year's sixth grade scores. That's where we placed our focus and that's where we got results. We are pleased to report that BRS sixth-grade students scored among the highest performing districts in the state.

On the other hand, grade three scores were not where they should be, considering the high quality staff that we have, and the actual academic level of the students. Other grades have areas of strength and areas that we can improve on. At the October 15<sup>th</sup> board of education meeting, school administrators presented a K-6 CMT action plan that is developmentally appropriate and that aligns with good first teaching practices.

We are pleased with federal *adequate yearly progress* scores that are also based on CMT results. These scores are the driving engine of *No Child Left Behind*. BRS scored at the 90%+ level in reading and 95% + in mathematics. The scores indicate students who are at or above the defined *proficiency* level on the CMT in those two areas.

### ***Run around Beecher: the track and nature trail***

Over the past several years, the building of a track at BRS has been a frequent topic of conversations. In fact, there have been attempts to initiate such a project. The Woodbridge School District's *Wellness Committee*, during the spring of 2007, made a recommendation to pursue this project. The *physical education department* at BRS and the town's *recreation department* supported the recommendation. The argument has been made that an exercise track would go a long way toward fighting heart disease and obesity with direct benefit to the children and staff of BRS as well as Woodbridge citizens.

In addition, students at BRS currently participate in a state required *one-mile run/walk* test measuring their cardio-respiratory fitness. Our children are currently transported to the Amity High School track where the test is administered. Having the track at BRS would greatly improve the chance for the children to improve their fitness level. They could run/walk for a sustained amount of time at least 3-5 times a week. Classes could run/walk a certain distance/time period during every outside (recess) period and chart their activity in class throughout the year. The additional student activity on the track would greatly improve the results on the *one-mile*

*run/walk* test, and more importantly, overall cardio vascular fitness.

State Senator Joseph Crisco recently offered Woodbridge a grant of \$15,000 to support construction of the track and revitalization of the *Nature Trail* on the campus of BRS. Both projects are now under discussion by the Boards of Education and Selectmen. Because the track will cost more than the amount provided through Senator Crisco's grant, financial considerations will have to be considered.

### ***Talented and gifted students get a boost***

BRS recognizes the unique learning needs and styles of all students by providing flexible learning environments that provide engaging instruction, enrichment, and support to all students. Students that are identified as *talented and gifted* (TAG) represent the top 5% of students demonstrating extraordinary learning ability and/or outstanding creative talent.

In Connecticut, school districts must identify talented and gifted students, but they are not required to provide special services. However, the Woodbridge School District does offer TAG services in the *Language Arts*, *Mathematics*, and *Arts*. In addition, classroom teachers, cognizant of a student's TAG identification and the area of strength, incorporate enriching and challenging instructional activities through the delivery of the curriculum.

Pullout programs, taking the child from the classroom for special instruction, will start this fall for TAG students.

### ***Working as a professional team improves achievement***

Schools and the educational process are dynamic, always growing and changing to meet the needs of diverse groups of students and families. The Woodbridge School District is embracing the concept of *Professional Learning Communities* as a vehicle for this dynamic process.

With a focus on learning, our teams will use the expertise of each team member through professional discourse, data analysis, and instructional decision making that impacts all children. Three simple, yet powerful, questions guide the discussion:

- What is it that we want all students to learn: by grade, by course, by unit of instruction?
- How will we know when each student has acquired the intended knowledge or skills?
- How will we respond when students experience difficulty so that we can improve current learning?

Wishing you well,

Gaeton F. Stella, Ph. D.