



# District 41 Think Tank FAQs

The Board of Education approved Think Tank recommendations on March 11, 2013.

## These FAQs address the following questions:

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## What is Think Tank?

A work group of teachers, administrators and parents, the Think Tank studied 21st century learning expectations at the elementary grades and the demands of new, more rigorous Common Core Standards; based on what it learned, it proposed changes for the elementary schools to be implemented over the course of three years.

## What is changing?

### For 2013-2014:

- In grades 2 through 5, the day will be in two main parts: literacy/social studies and STEAM/math (an integrated approach to teaching Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Math)
- Teachers in grades 2 through 5 specialize in either literacy/social studies or in STEAM/math for greater subject-matter expertise.
- In grades 4 and 5, students will be in multiage classes for their literacy/social studies class. They will be in grade-level classes for STEAM/math.
- Art, music and physical education will be taught as separate classes; students will go to these in the same groupings as they have their main classes.
- There will be two times during the day to provide enrichment or interventions to students in small groups according to their needs called "What I Need," or WIN.
- Teachers will have common collaboration time.

### For 2014-2015:

- Multiage will be implemented at 2/3 in literacy/social studies.
- The new STEAM curriculum will be introduced, aligned to the Common Core Standards.

### For 2015-2016:

- Multiage will be implemented in STEAM/math in 2/3 and 4/5.

## Why are we making these changes?

- We know we need to do things differently in light of the future; District 41 students perform well relative to the state, but data shows US students lagging behind those in other countries, especially in math and science.
- In 2010, Illinois adopted the new Common Core Standards,

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## Think Tank's Guiding Principles

1. Give every child what they need when they need it.
2. Give every child an experience that is rigorous, relevant and built on strong relationships.

which are more rigorous than the state standards they replaced.

- Today's young people compete for college acceptance and for jobs against applicants from around the world—we must prepare our students to succeed in this global environment.
- Think Tank has been looking for ways within our current resources to give able students more opportunities to soar, struggling students more resources to succeed and to bring the talents of the whole school together for every child.
- Our satisfaction surveys have consistently shown rigor and challenge as a concern of our students and parents.
- We can't imagine what jobs will be like when today's children enter the workforce, but we do know that to succeed they will need to be confident self-starters who know themselves as learners, have a sound background in literacy, math and science, can express themselves well, and who can contribute in collaborative environments; in other words, they will need to have made the District 41 Learner Characteristics part of themselves as learners, as people and as members of a global community.

### **Explain teacher specialization**

- Specialization allows teachers to build greater content knowledge; teacher knowledge is an important influence on student learning, particularly in light of the demands of the new Common Core Standards and our plans to incorporate engineering, deeper science instruction and more rigorous math into the day.
- Elementary teachers in grades 2-5 will specialize in either literacy/social studies or in STEAM/math.
- Each teacher will have one section in the morning and one in the afternoon, and will serve as the homeroom teacher for their morning students.

### **Explain multiage groupings**

- By multiage, we mean an approach that lets us look primarily at a child's learning needs, rather than his or her chronological grade. It is *not* teaching two curricula in one class, and it is *not* grouping the highs from one grade with the lows from the next. It *is* a strategic approach that lets teachers better meet the needs of each child in the class.
- We are starting multiage in grades 4 and 5 for literacy/social studies. Students will be grouped heterogeneously (in a mix of grades and abilities) for core instruction, and will be more narrowly grouped within their classroom for their guided group time. There will be flexibility to change groupings.
- Teachers and principals will work together as they do now do assign students in healthy mixes for each multiage class—a variety of learners but also making sure that no child is isolated; in other words, that all children have at least one or two

others at their level.

### **How do multiage classes differ from tracking?**

- We are not implementing tracking, which is the persistent and ongoing division of students by ability. In tracking, students have little opportunity to move to a different level over the course of the year.
- The Think Tank concept is the opposite of that and enhances the opportunities for able students to soar and for struggling students to master material and move ahead. Multiage classrooms will be organized in heterogeneous groups within which would be time for narrower small groups for guided instruction.
- The whole system is designed for maximum attention to each child's needs.

### **How does multiage grouping help teachers meet more student needs?**

- Currently, there is a lot of overlap in the range of learning levels in adjacent grades and a range of ages in each grade.
- By grouping those grades together and having teachers specialize, there are more teachers available to focus on learning levels—four literacy/social studies teachers and four STEAM/math teachers for each level, each teaching two sections.
- Research shows there are many social-emotional benefits to students in a multiage setting. However, our main motivation is academic. Multiage gives us much more flexibility to group children appropriately for their best learning environment.

### **How are art, music and PE affected?**

These classes will be taught separately and there will be opportunities to integrate them into core subjects. Students will go to these classes with the students in their core classes. For example, if a child has PE in the same half of the day as he/she has literacy/social studies, then those are the children that will be together in PE.

### **How is the day currently scheduled at the elementary schools?**

- To get the instruction and services they need, today's students move around a good deal and see many adults during the day.
- In addition to their classroom teacher, they see teachers for art, music, PE, Targeted Learning Time (where they may be grouped with students from other classrooms), and for resources and services (such as special education, English Language Learning or social work). They move as a whole class to some of these; for others they move in small groups or as individuals.
- They also see the librarian, school nurse, psychologist, learning aides, administrators and so forth.

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### **CURRENT DAY**

- Literacy/SS block (whole class/guided groups)
- TLT (Targeted Learning Time)
- Specials  
(art, music, PE, LLC)
- Lunch
- Math block  
(whole class, some teachers also using guided groups for math)
- Science
- Specials

- They are with students in other grades for lunch, band, orchestra and ELL as well as in their families and neighborhoods, for after-school activities such as youth sports, and in childcare settings.

### **How will this proposed school day differ?**

Students would start each day in a short "homeroom" with either their literacy/social studies or their STEAM/math\* teacher—whichever teacher they have in the morning. In the afternoon, they will switch to their other core teacher.

### **Will students be traveling more around the building?**

Student travel will not be much different than today. Students now travel for their "specials" of art, music and PE, for TLT and for their services, for those students who receive them. In grades 2 through 5, students would have one more transition than they do today.

### **If my child has an IEP and needs a special education aide, or is an ELL student, how will he/she be affected?**

Special Education, 504 and ELL students will receive the same resources and supports that they do today; Special Education students will continue to be included in the general education environment consistent with their IEPs.

### **How will the changes affect the gifted program?**

Students will continue to receive Advanced and Enriched Curriculum (AEC) services.

### **Will they be with those same children each year, for two years, or does that change each year?**

Some children would be new each year; in year two of a 4/5 grouping, the fourth graders would be new to the class.

### **2013-2014 DAY for grades 2 through 5**

- Literacy/SS (teacher starts with homeroom time; heterogeneous whole class/guided small groups)
- PE (with their literacy/SS classmates)
- WIN (What I Need) for literacy
- Lunch
- STEAM/math block (If child starts day with Math/STEAM, then this teacher is the homeroom teacher.)
- Art/music with their STEAM/math classmates
- WIN (What I Need) for math
- Library scheduled flexibly consistent with best practices; the hub for student research

### **Describe the literacy/social studies block**

- Literacy standards are broadly K-12 and are organized K/1, 2/3 and 4/5, making a multi-grade approach a good fit for these subjects.
- The district literacy specialists have created modules that embed social studies content in literacy; these modules are not tied to a specific grade level. Over the course of two years, every child would have all eight modules with no repeats.
- As today, literacy/social studies will receive whole-class instruction and be taught in fluid groups for small-group guided instruction.

### **Describe the STEAM/math (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Technology) block**

- During the other half of their day, students would be with their STEAM/math teacher.
- STEAM means that science and engineering are taught with math and technology.
- Math will also be taught as its own subject so that students have the math skills they need to apply during STEAM.
- Students will continue to have music and art separately, but there may be times when the arts can be infused in a STEAM setting.
- In this half of the day, students will be with their same-grade peers (multiage is planned for STEAM in 2015-2016)
- For 2013-2014, we will use our current science curriculum; new science standards are expected in time for us to get the new STEAM curriculum ready for 2014-2015.
- We are developing an accelerated math curriculum for all students to align with Common Core expectations; special attention is being paid to the curricular needs of struggling math students.

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### **How would STEAM labs be used?**

Each school would decide how to allocate some space for a STEAM lab, a place where children would become scientists and have the opportunity to work on large projects. A classroom STEAM teacher would be assigned to that space and would switch spaces when other STEAM teachers have projects requiring the space. We do not have sufficient room to take space offline to be used only as a lab.

### **What about kindergarten and first grade?**

These grades would be as they are today. We would need to have full-day kindergarten in order to make a K/1 approach work. Full-day kindergarten is a future goal if we can figure out the space.

### **What is WIN time**

WIN stands for "What I Need." Students will have two WIN times: one for literacy, one for math. WIN will be similar to Targeted Learning Time, a time for students to receive help or extensions/enrichment. It's a highly individual time that can be used flexibly to help give every child what they need when they need it.

### **What is homeroom?**

Homeroom is a short time dedicated to both routine matters like attendance and for activities designed to strengthen the learner characteristics. The homeroom teacher will be either their literacy/social studies teacher or their STEAM/math teacher, whoever the student starts the day with. Multiage students would have the same homeroom teacher for two years (with processes in place for alternate placement when the relationship is not ideal). With a two-year relationship, the teacher and students get to know each other better and in the second year, the teacher already knows the learning styles and personalities of half the class.

### **How will social-emotional factors be addressed?**

Students must feel safe and happy in order to learn well. Teachers will continue to focus on each child's social-emotional welfare as they do today. We have many resources to support the teacher in meeting those needs, such as PBIS, social workers and psychologists. Teachers will continue to work together to serve students they have in common with respect to the whole child. The opportunity for children to have a two-year relationship with their homeroom teacher creates a bond with and a comfort level with the teacher for children and their families.

### **What relationship does this work have to Hadley?**

We feel children would enter Hadley as stronger, more confident students able to master more challenging work. Hadley was the focus of a large-scale organizational improvement effort beginning in 2007. As a result, Hadley's schedule was revamped, exploratory classes updated, more opportunities were provided for struggling students and more time allowed for core curriculum. In addition, a number of classes are now multiage including PE and exploratory. Hadley will be moving to a STEM approach in the future, as the new science standards become available.

### **How will teachers prepare for next year?**

- Our Professional Development Team is organizing opportunities based on teacher needs.
- Teachers will not have new curriculum for next year, except that modules will be new to second grade teachers: the science curriculum will change in 2014-2015.
- Teachers have stated their preference on which area they would like to teach next year; most teachers like the idea of getting to go deeper in their area of preference.

### **What additional information can you provide around the specific schools that the Think Tank looked at?**

- Spartanburg, SC: Visited several schools: a multiage Montessori, an arts-infused school, a school based on Stephen Covey's leadership principles, a project-based learning school and an international baccalaureate school.
- Waukesha, WI: Visited Waukesha STEM Academy, a charter school that was multiage (k/1, 2/3 and 4/5) with teachers specializing in literacy/engineering or science/math. There was a lot of flexible grouping and student movement in this school.
- Champaign, IL: Visited a STEM school that had made its STEM lab the heart of the school.
- Schaumburg, IL District 54. District 54 has many multiage schools and teams from District 41 have visited some of these.

### **How can I learn more?**

Read the information on the Think Tank Web page ([www.d41.org/thinktank.htm](http://www.d41.org/thinktank.htm)). Please direct your questions and comments to Communications Director Julie Worthen, [jworthen@d41.org](mailto:jworthen@d41.org), (630) 534-7218.