

Elementary, my dear

By [Jim Boyle](#) on

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Editor

Children as young as 4 and 5 years old filed into classrooms across the Elk River Area School District this past week for the start the 2012–13 school year.

They were greeted in the elementary schools by teachers full of hope and optimism who will roll out a new math curriculum, make use of an increasing number of iPads and continue to intervene at all points in a child's first six years of school.

Their work will be bolstered by continued efforts to further develop Professional Learning Communities and other ingredients of the acronym soup that helped make last year successful in the world of standardized testing and smoothly running schools. Efforts to produce greater community and parental involvement will also be heightened at some schools this year.

These were findings of a questionnaire sent out to elementary school principals a week before the start of school. The same questionnaire was sent to secondary principals. (See page 5 for a story on middle school. Watch next week's Star News for a report on the high school scene.)

The challenge ahead from the perspective of veteran administrator Donna Williams will be working to help each student, with whatever diverse learning needs they bring to the classroom, be successful learners. Williams reported Lincoln staff hope to engage parents more than ever.

"We want families to know how much their education



A Meadowdale Elementary School second-grade teacher showed off her rainbow-colored tie-dyed shirt, something she and each of her colleagues who teach second grade Mites at Meadowdale wore on opening day. Photos by Jim Boyle

and learning support means to their student's success and their school's (success) in meeting achievement goals," Williams said.

Teachers and administrators will even be including parents in on some of the new technology being tried for the first time. Certain classrooms have a handful of iPads in hopes of accelerating learning. Family involvement initiatives will include exploration of new learning apps.

Dan Collins, principal of Twin Lakes Elementary, said his school plans to have several technology nights.

"We want parents to be able to come in and have hands-on activities and explore what students are doing at school with iPads, Smart Boards and computer labs. "We will also help parents go through parent portal and search websites."

The elementary schools in the district will be a hot topic in the Elk River Area School District with a pair of operating levies before the voters — one a renewal of an existing levy about to expire and another to, among other things, add a free all-day everyday kindergarten program to parents of 5- year-olds at a cost of \$2.2 million. The second question also includes additional operating dollars for curriculum and technology to speed up the rate in which new material and curriculum gets in the hands of children, as well as technology to assist learning.

"We need to renew the levy to continue to help with the costs and all-day everyday kindergarten is one of the best investments we could make for our future," Williams said.

Hassan Elementary School is already making a concerted effort to reach out to learners and families not yet attending their school through its Kindergarten Prep program. It was taught by kindergarten teachers and Minnesota Reading Corps tutors for the first time recently. The program served as an opportunity for kindergarten students to become familiar with the school, practice daily routines and reduce anxiety about the first day of school.

Students also participated in learning activities that focused on early literacy, math, writing, school readiness and social/emotional skills.

"We feel the program was a success and that it went a long way to prepare students for a successful start to their school careers," said Hassan Principal Heidi Adamson-Baer.

PLCs, PBIS, STEM, RTI, W.I.N and the Seven Correlates

Erin Talley, principal at Otsego Elementary School, is happy her school will not be launching any new programs this year. Otsego, which fell into AYP jail for not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) a few years ago, has undergone some of the most substantial changes of any elementary school in the district.

Otsego's math proficiency increased by 13 percent last year and reading proficiency increased by 5



Lisa Konkol, Jan McKernan and Sue Stang are wearing their rainbow-colored tie-dyed shirts on the opening day of school



Kiara Henry of Elk River enjoyed the ride after a sibling was dropped off on the opening day of school. The 6-month-old has a few years until she will attend school.

percent, “and we are committed to improving even more this year,” Talley said.

The plan is to refine what works in the school, Talley said, referring to the Seven Correlates of Effective Schools, Response to Intervention, Positive Behavior Intervention and Professional Learning Communities that are being used in schools across the school district. Each of these programs started out small in perhaps a school or two and has grown.

For instance, PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention System), which was mentioned as a key component to the 2012–13 school year, started out five years ago in Zimmerman.

“We feel that we have made great strides behaviorally with our PBIS program,” said Susan Johnston, principal of Zimmerman Elementary School. “A popular name for this is Zebra Pride. “We will begin year five of this program and our data from each year shows that this program is increasing our positive behavior in every corner of our building.”

Much of the measures that come in the form of acronyms are designed to intervene when a student is struggling with a particular subject or a particular area of a subject. Others are formed to help educators work together more effectively and focus more on what will produce results.

Educators credit these endeavors with pushing test scores up last year and in recent years. New challenges include maintaining that growth and working to elevate scores even more.

Mike Malmberg, principal at Parker Elementary, said his staff is relatively young due to retirements, so his challenge is combing great new ideas along with getting his younger staff up to speed on all of its programs.

In addition to all the systems already in place to make this happen, Malmberg’s particularly excited about the hiring of a half-time interventions teacher to train assistants and to work with individual grade-level teams to provide support for struggling learners.

“I’m excited to give (teachers and assistants) a valuable resource of a person and time to help them,” Malmberg said.

Dave Hauer, the principal at Meadowvale Elementary School, said his staff has been diligently using the RTI, or Response to Interventions, model and are now ready to implement a program that will push teachers and support staff in front of kids for 30-minute bursts of intense instruction four days a week to meet kids where they’re at, whether they are on the low end or the high end academically.

“Our goal is to meet each of our individual student’s needs — be it remedial, challenging or areas of interest such as book clubs, chess, orienteering, foreign language, etc.,” Hauer said, noting the results will be tracked to see if the effort makes a difference.

Westwood and some other school will try a program called W.I.N. to meet students where they’re at educationally in math and reading.

Westwood Principal Kari Sampson said her school is focused on increasing its MCA (Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment) index rates in reading and math by 3 percent and decrease the number of students’ high rates of absences by 5 percent.

“We want to create a welcoming, supportive learning environment for all students, staff, parents and community,” Sampson said.

Educators across the Elk River Area School District will roll out a new math curriculum called Math in Focus that is based on “Singapore math.”

“Singapore math” is the term used to refer to the mathematics curriculum used in Singapore. For over 15 years, Singapore has consistently scored at the top of international mathematics comparison studies. Its teaching approach focuses on problem solving, deep understanding and model drawing.

Math in Focus is the U.S. edition of Singapore’s most widely used program.

“Math in Focus will help us teach our students both how and why math works,” said Phil Schriefels, the Rogers Elementary School principal. “This deep understanding means that they will be better able to use math in real-life situations.”

Schriefels said programs provide our teachers with a variety of instructional materials that helps them meet the wide range of educational needs of all of our students.