

## **SECTION TWO – BACKGROUND AND PROCESS**

### **Background**

The Wilmette District 39 Community Relations Committee (CRC) considered a variety of topics for focus in the 2005-2006 academic year. The CRC reviewed the District 39 strategic plan, past CRC studies including the 2004-2005 creative report, various topics of interest to administrators, teachers and parents, as well as past school board discussions, and it reviewed academic test score data.

During the 2004-2005 School year, the Wilmette District 39 Board of Education received its benchmarking study. Some of the test score data revealed that among District 39 students taking the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT), girls were significantly outperforming boys in reading and in writing, and that there was not a statistically significant difference in mathematics. Further, the data suggested that in 2004, the gap between girls' and boys' performance on the ISATs was larger in District 39 than in a group of benchmark districts largely in the North Shore Suburbs of Chicago (but also including Hinsdale in the Western Suburbs).

The Board of Education's questions encouraged the CRC to take a hard look at these issues. In parallel with the CRC looking at these issues, District 39 provided some data on the differences in gender performance on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, which District 39 students in grades 3 through 7 took in November 2005. The questions that the Board members asked of the school district representatives in connection with that data have also informed this report.

After much consideration, the CRC elected to focus on two topics for the 2005-2006 academic year: Progress Reporting and Gender Differences. The CRC divided its membership into two sub-committees, each focused on one of the topics. The charge of the Gender Differences sub-team was to understand:

- to what extent (if any) are boys and/or girls are underperforming in our schools;
- to what extent do policies or instructional practices in our schools contribute to gender-based differences in academic performance, and
- what levers may exist to address gender-based differences in academic performance.

It is our belief that the individuals in the educational community who raised issues about gender-based academic, behavioral and social issues were wise to do so. There are issues and opportunities that hold considerable promise.

This report to the Wilmette District 39 Board of Education is intended to be a step on a journey. It is a journey that requires the development of a longitudinal database that will ultimately benefit District 39 far beyond the gender differences issues. It is a journey that suggests opportunities for enhancements in academic performance of students of both genders. It involves refining our understanding of these issues – particularly at the younger elementary school ages and at the placement of our students as they leave District 39. It is a journey that is best undertaken with New Trier as a partner, to understand if these issues remain at the High School level for our student, and to see whether the concerns raised in this report manifest themselves in student testing and

placement as our students enroll in High School. The job is not yet complete, but we hope that we have taken an important step in enriching District 39's understanding of these issues.

### **Sub-Committee Composition**

Eight CRC members comprise the Gender Differences sub-committee: four parents, two classroom teachers (one of whom is now a curriculum differentiation support teacher), one school psychologist and the Junior High School Principal. The two co-chairpersons of the sub-committee are both parents, and the two other parental members are the current and immediate past Chairpersons of the CRC.

Collectively, the parents have children who have attended or are attending each of the six schools in the District (four elementary schools, Middle School and Junior High School), and their children are a mix of genders. The sub-committee was composed of five women and four men. The educators on the sub-committee are all experienced, and the administrators have all previously been administrators in other school districts. Each of the members of the sub-committee either was responsible for a block of work or co-chaired the completion of a block of work.

## **Focus of the Team's Efforts**

The CRC Gender Differences sub-committee divided its work into four primary blocks.

### *Literature Review:*

First, the committee reviewed both the academic literature and the mainstream press articles and publications on gender differences, including data on differences in academic performance, social development, learning approaches, brain research, etc. The sub-team reviewed articles suggesting that gender differences were a major problem as well as articles suggesting that the issues associated with gender differences are simply a fad.

The sub-team felt that these varying opinions informed the dialogue and provided insight into potential actions and the implications of these actions. Substantially all of the members of the sub-team contributed articles or sources that they thought worthy of the group's review. This document contains a summary of the literature including insights and conclusions that may have implications for the district, and a compilation of source documents for those who wish to pursue these issues with greater rigor.

### *Input from Educators and Administrators:*

Second, the sub-committee undertook to understand the perceptions of educators and administrators in District 39 on gender differences in academic, behavioral and social performance. They began by reviewing the gender differences objectives in the Junior High School Improvement Plan for 2005-2006 with Principal Dave Palzet, because the Junior High was the one school in the district that had identified these issues as worthy of a proactive effort in the current school year, including it in their school improvement plan. The sub-committee developed a survey instrument for educators in February 2006.

The participation in the survey instrument exceeded the expectations of the sub-committee. Over 270 educators filled out the survey, which was administered electronically. There was no unanimity of views, but the sub-committee benefited greatly from the sense of the educators' perceptions as well as specific comments from them. Some see the issues as a passing trend, while others see serious issues.

The Wilmette District 39 Community thanks the educators and the Wilmette Educational Association for a tremendous response. The sub-committee also developed questions that members discussed with the Administrative Council in April for over an hour. The input from both the educators and members of the Administrative Council informed and are reflected in both the findings and recommendations of the sub-committee.

### *Data From District 39:*

Third, the sub-committee sought to gain a baseline of factual data that would view the issues related to gender differences, not as an academic exercise, but as a live, breathing set of dynamics inside District 39. The team developed an initial request list for Dr. McGee and the administration that focused in six areas:

- student academic performance, through grades or other internal tests that we administer,

- student standardized test scores,
- student academic placement,
- IEPs and their impact on gender differences,
- behavioral dynamics,
- and classroom teacher composition.

Because there is no single repository for this information in District 39 today (much of the information exists at individual schools, in a variety of spreadsheets or database programs and is collected in ad hoc manner), many individuals in many schools were instrumental in collecting data. The sub-committee owes much appreciation to each of the school principals and many of the administration and many unidentified individuals at specific schools.

Each of the four school district individuals on the sub-committee were extremely helpful in identifying the type of information that was available, and in some cases worked with their colleagues to actually locate the data. The team subsequently sought to expand the data collection to include information by gender about 8<sup>th</sup> grade placement tests for 9<sup>th</sup> grade and actual 9<sup>th</sup> grade student placement and success (from New Trier High School). We have attempted to gather this information, but have not yet been successful, but continue to seek this data. Our recommendations reflect the need for a collaborative K-12 effort involving New Trier and D39, and we are optimistic that the leadership in New Trier will recognize the value of this collaborative effort.

#### *Input and Data from Other Districts*

Fourth, the sub-committee sought to learn from other districts about how they viewed gender differences among their students at multiple levels. Did these districts observe differences in academic, behavioral and social performance between boys and girls? Did these districts see issues worthy of addressing and if so, what actions had they taken? To address this, the sub-committee undertook a multi-pronged approach.

Through the efforts of Dr. McGee, the sub-committee was able to review reports from Edina, Minnesota, a unitary (PreK-12) school district in the Twin Cities area that had previously undertaken efforts to understand and address gender differences in the Edina School District. The sub-committee has been unable to identify any other districts that have undertaken efforts of the depth and rigor of the Edina effort. After reviewing the Edina work, the sub-committee sought to gather information from benchmark districts both in Northern Illinois and in select other areas in the country (for instance, Highland Park, TX and Scarsdale, NY) on the gender differences issues.

To do this, the sub-committee benefited from phone survey work that the Progress Reporting sub-committee had undertaken with these other districts. Most of the other districts surveyed lagged behind District 39 in understanding differences in gender academic, behavioral and social issues. Finally, the sub-committee (with substantial assistance from Phil Earvolino) sought to compare our data with that of Edina, Minnesota (and select other data where available) to ascertain whether our issues are unique to Wilmette or are being experienced in at least one other similar district that has studied these issues.