



**WESTWOOD PUBLIC SCHOOLS**  
**E. W. Thurston Middle School**  
*Aim High Work Hard Do the Right Thing Help Someone Else*

Michael Redmon  
*Principal*

Matthew Kuklantz  
*Assistant Principal*

**Principal's Report of Entry Findings**  
**Michael Redmon**  
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Dear TMS Community,

I am extremely honored to be a member of Thurston Middle School. It is hard to believe that approximately eight months have passed since I started as the TMS Principal. Since joining the administrative team and Thurston community, I am very thankful for the support and kindness that has been given to me as I have transitioned into this role. At our Curriculum Night this past Fall, I shared with you that my plan for the year was to complete an entry plan in the hopes that it would provide me with important information and experiences that would help me thoughtfully, effectively, and strategically lead Thurston Middle School. As someone who has a passion for the academic, social, and emotional education of middle school children, I am eager to share my findings. My findings highlight areas of strength, raise questions, begin deeper explorations, and engage stakeholders in collaborative discussions that connect in many ways to our [WPS Strategy for District Improvement](#).

**Objectives**

1. To understand how Thurston Middle School operates/functions daily
2. To understand the Thurston Middle School student experience(s)
3. To assist in the development of strategies that promote the best middle level practices aligned to the WPS Strategy for District Improvement.

**Process/Information Gathering**

Since last spring when I was appointed Principal of Thurston, I have engaged in a systematic entry process designed to learn as much as possible about Thurston Middle School. My process was designed to elicit as much information as possible about Thurston's strengths and areas for growth by listening, observing, reading, and examining available data. These entry activities included such things as:

- Surveying staff last June
- Shadowing a student last spring
- Conducting individual staff interviews
- Conducting multiple focus groups (parents, students, staff, PTO, Site Council)

- Frequently observing teaching and learning in classrooms
- Visiting classrooms in elementary schools
- Reviewing key documents, such as handbooks, website, teacher contract, policy manual, etc.
- Reviewing and analyzing assessment data, such as MCAS and student climate surveys
- Attending a myriad of students' activities and events

## **Key Findings**

### **I. TMS Culture**

Thurston Middle School has a thriving and vibrant culture and a strong sense of community. Students and parents feel that students are safe and supported and that teachers are dedicated skilled.

Thurston has a highly skilled and dedicated staff that is strongly committed to developing engaging and rigorous curriculum units and lessons for students, as indicated the most recent [school report card](#). The staff is highly collaborative and functions as an effective team. The current schedule supports teachers' ability collaborate by providing time to meet through the team structure and department configuration. Teachers meet regularly as grade level content teams and as interdisciplinary red and blue teams serving a common cohort of students.

Many teachers, parents, and students commented about the "high levels of professionalism, comradery, and positive feelings" that are present among TMS teachers and between teachers and families. When teachers, parents, and students were asked to "Name three things going well at TMS," a strong theme that emerged was the supportive, caring culture that exists. Teachers said such things as, "The staff is like family." Parents said, "Great staff...Teachers are willing to talk about your child anytime." Students said, "We have very encouraging and supportive teachers."

In each grade level focus group, students reported that they felt that TMS is a welcoming and safe place. This sentiment is supported by the data from our Views of Climate and Learning (VOCAL) survey from 2018. VOCAL is a DESE survey given to students in Grade 8 that measures students' perceptions of school climate. While there are, of course, areas for continued improvement, the results indicated that Thurston is in the top 15% of middle schools in Massachusetts terms of students feeling safe especially in the categories of emotional, physical, and "bullying safety."

In a focus group of sixth graders, students specifically stated that they felt that it was "easy to make friends," "there are new experiences and people to connect with," and "I finally feel like I can be myself." They also commented that their teachers encourage their efforts as students, convey that they believe they can be successful, and are effective at helping them learn. Parents also stated, "The transition to 6th grade has gone well," and "There is a lot of support for students and resources." Parents particularly commented on the 5th grade visit in the spring, 5th grade parents' night, and the open house as positive experiences that helped students transition.

Finally, parental involvement emerged as a theme in parent focus group sessions. Parents expressed that with the transition between elementary school and middle school they have experienced fewer invitations from the school to be involved or included in their students' school experience. Some parents find this difference troubling, while others expressed that they expected some distance in order to support their middle schooler becoming more independent. This is an area for further exploration.

In conclusion, the culture at Thurston is generally positive and safe. That being said, it is still important for us to continue to work together and keep the lines of communication open and strengthen our communication with parents. We want to continue to explore ways to keep our community healthy and supported. As the needs of students and families evolve and change, we must commit ourselves to addressing and responding to issues that arise. As we embark on making change at Thurston, we need to be mindful to build on our current strengths and preserve the collaborative and positive culture that currently exists.

### **Questions for Consideration**

1. How do we continue to maintain and improve the positive professional and student culture at TMS?
2. How can we continue to support students in their transition from 5th to 6th grade and 8th to 9th grade?
3. How can we best meet the needs of our parent community so that we have a strong partnership that will promote the best environment for all stakeholders?

## **II. Curriculum & Instruction**

“Meaningful learning experiences” is the first objective listed on the WPS Strategy for District Improvement. Specifically, the priorities of this plan focus on inquiry based STEM initiatives, authentic student-centered learning experiences, and exploring the use of instructional time. While conducting my entry plan, I specifically focused on these areas when gathering feedback and learning about TMS.

- A significant amount of work has been dedicated to the content areas associated with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). The District's curriculum review in Science and the newly restructured Science/Math Coordinator position have helped to lead the work in these areas.
- In science, teachers have spent the past two years implementing new units and observing one another so that students receive rigorous and engaging instructional experiences. The improvement in science on recent MCAS scores indicate progress is being made.
- This school year, vertical collaboration in both math and science has increased between TMS staff and elementary staff. Teachers have been visiting classrooms both within the middle school and between schools for the purpose of observing instruction and having conversations about the math and science programs and content.

- In Math, feedback from parents has revealed differing views on the current math program and model. Many parents feel that math instruction is meeting the needs of their child(ren), while others expressed a perception that the program is not rigorous enough. Often, parents who are concerned about rigor choose to enroll their students in formal math classes such as “Russian Math” outside of school. There is clearly some confusion about the purpose of leveling classes in math, what the distinction is between levels, and the implications of middle school math placement on students’ trajectory in math. Further, there is a need for more conversation with parents about the goals of the math program, its alignment with state and national math standards, and the work done during middle school to lay the foundation for conceptual understanding in math in addition to procedural fluency and the use of algorithms. Notably, students expressed that they feel supported in the area of math, making comments such as, “I’ve always struggled, but math at TMS has made me successful.”
- English/Language Arts (ELA) is beginning a curriculum review process. The English and Social Studies Department currently is led by two teachers who have full teaching responsibilities. With the release of new Social Studies standards and from conversations at the ELA review process, it’s clear that there is a need to add curriculum leadership for these departments, which is why a recommendation has been made in the budget process to add an ELA/Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator who will have dedicated time to focus on leading these departments.
- Integrated learning opportunities for middle level learners is an important factor when it comes to developing authentic learning experiences for students. A curriculum leadership team is essential to ensuring that our programs are current, rigorous, engaging, and meeting the needs of our students. The addition of an ELA/Social Studies Coordinator will help complete the leadership team necessary for this work.
- TMS currently operates on an eight-block schedule. Students have approximately eight transitions a day, a 30 minute lunch, and an Advisory/X-Block period for 40 minutes. All academic classes are 43 minutes long. Students have every class at the same time each day. Teachers have also communicated the desire to have more instructional time and to meet with classes at different times during the day.
- TMS has a robust offering of exploratories that are part of every students experience. Exploratories include Music, Drama, Engineering, Computer Science, PE, Culinary Arts Consumer Education, and Health. Teachers, parents, and students have all praised the amount of offerings, what they teach TMS students, and how valuable they are for students.
- Through my observations and the feedback I have collected, I have noticed there is lack of opportunities for students to receive formal academic interventions and support similar to what is available to students in the elementary setting. X-Block is used to support students, but it is not designed as a time for students to receive remedial support to address a lack of skill deficits. This year, TMS has been piloting some programs and intervention groups to address this need using our Reading Specialist in order to assess the effectiveness of the interventions being delivered, evaluate the program model, and explore a structure to build an intervention model into our school schedule. While this year’s pilot has focused on addressing skill deficits, future work will also include the use of intervention programming to extend learning for students who are exceeding grade-level standards.

**Questions for Consideration:**

1. How could the TMS schedule be revised to best support authentic student learning and meet program needs?
2. What should the process be for reviewing and revising the TMS schedule?
3. How do we create an intervention model/opportunities for students to receive extra support within general education or extension?
4. How will our new instructional leadership team (ELA/Social Studies; Math/Science) help design more authentic learning experiences for students?

**III. Structures****Teaming**

Organizing students in teams at the middle school level is considered a best practice in the educational research. Teaming teachers across content areas is beneficial because it allows for interdisciplinary collaboration to occur and it encourages teachers to share insights on how to best support student learning. TMS has a long standing practice of placing students on teams. In general, teachers value the team structure and report that it is effective. In particular, teachers feel it is important to have a special educator as a member of each team. Some challenges with the team structure do exist: 1) Given current student enrollment, in an effort to keep class sizes reasonable, the teams have evolved to include either part-time teachers or teachers who instruct across grade levels, which complicates team functioning. 2) ELA teachers at TMS contractually teach fewer classes than teachers in other disciplines, which creates scheduling and staffing challenges that impact the ability to create “pure” teams. While there were many positive comments made by teachers, students, and parents about teaming, there were some questions that will be important to explore based on feedback from constituents and my observations. They are:

1. Are teams collaborating across disciplines in the most effective ways?
2. How does the teaming model impact the schedule?
3. What is the right number of students on a team?

**Communication about Student Learning and Progress**

Students and parents in Westwood experience a transition between elementary school and middle school in how student progress is communicated. While the elementary is focused on standard-based reporting, Thuston employs a traditional grading system. Parents and students have expressed that they find it challenging to monitor student progress, understand what students are working on and next steps to improve. Parents, in particular, would like to be able to more closely monitor their students’ grades. Parents and teachers also expressed some difficulties and frustrations around the structure of parent-teacher conferences.

**Questions for consideration:**

1. How can we ensure that students understand their learning goals and know what they need to do to achieve them?
2. How can we ensure that parents have timely and helpful feedback about their students' progress?
3. Are there other models for parent conferences that improve the communication of student progress?

**IV. Social Emotional****Advisory**

TMS implemented an advisory program three years ago. Incorporating an advisory program at the middle school level is considered best practice and is designed to support the students' social and emotional development and offer opportunities to discuss issues as they emerge within the school environment. Advisory groups are comprised of approximately 8-12 students and one adult. In this small group, there is the opportunity to form positive, supportive relationships both among students and between students and an adult who gets to know him or her well. Advisories meet approximately two times a week for twenty minutes.

It is clear that parents understand the value of an advisory program for the students. Students also reported that they like having the time to explore topics in a smaller setting. However, comments were also made by all parties that advisory seems inconsistent from year to year, and that a more formalized curriculum would be beneficial.

Teachers received professional development prior to the initial implementation of advisory. The professional development was successful in providing teachers some strategies and tools for conducting advisory meetings. However, teachers report that more robust training is needed in order to fully realize the potential of the advisory and fully develop a model that makes sense for Thurston. Observationally, the advisory model is inconsistently implemented across the building. Currently, a group of teachers is working on a proposal during professional development time that aims to create a three-year curriculum for teachers to implement.

**Questions for consideration**

1. How do we develop an advisory program that has a consistent structure and curriculum that supports the social/emotional learning needs of TMS students?
2. What further training/resources do advisors need to implement an effective advisory program?
3. What is the right schedule / amount of time / time of day for advisory to occur for students?

## **Homework**

Homework is an area that came up in many settings. Perspectives about the volume of homework assigned vary and seemed to fall into two “camps:” Some parents and students communicated that there they believe that too much homework is assigned at TMS, while others believe that there should be more homework assigned. Interestingly, I did not hear from a critical mass of people who think the volume of homework is just right. In general, when the topic of homework came up with teachers, their focus was on the quality and purpose of homework, not only volume.

Observationally, there are differences among teams in the supports provided for homework. For example, one grade level team provides a “catch up” night, while the other does not. A theme among students is captured by one student’s comment, “Sometimes you have all your tests and projects due on the same day and during the same week, and there are some weeks where you have nothing.”

## **Questions for Consideration**

1. What is the purpose of homework?
2. What does homework at TMS look like?
3. What is a reasonable amount of homework for TMS students?
4. How do we support students so that they manage homework expectations in a healthy way?
5. How are teachers on a team communicating with each other about homework?

## **Next Steps**

This year I have had the privilege of learning, observing, and fostering relationships across the community while beginning to explore opportunities for TMS. Through this process, I have collected a significant amount of information that will begin to guide our work. As an instructional leader, my belief has always been that any form of school improvement is achieved by effective collaboration. And this process has served to identify questions and themes that need to be explored together. My hope is that within the coming months, we will create a TMS leadership team that will prioritize our work, look more deeply into these areas, and develop strategies to achieve growth. In the Fall, I will outline the work we hope to accomplish for the upcoming school year.

Lastly, I would like to thank Emily Parks, Allison Borchers, Abigail Hanscom, Matthew Kuklantz, Edith Graichen, my fellow administrators, the TMS faculty and staff, students, parents, and community members for your support and participation. Your involvement in this process has been the crucial starting point for what I believe will have a significant impact on improving and enhancing the educational experience of current and future TMS students. I am excited and honored to start this work with all of you. TMS is a great place and a wonderful community.