

# The Hillside Program Modification Report

Submitted to Superintendent Russell January 29, 2007

## Introduction

On February 15, 2006, in accordance with Board policy IGBH and the Board's Alternative School Review Process, the Board approved the superintendent's recommendation that Hillside develop a plan for program modification to address the key findings of the Alternative School Review report related to the lack of distinctiveness of its educational strategy. It was subsequently determined that the program modification should be an evolution of Hillside's formerly approved curriculum focus, rather than an entirely new and/or unrelated educational focus or strategy.

The superintendent directed the alternative school review team, consisting of Carl Hermanns, Jerry Henderson, Kay Mehas, and Ray Gross to conduct a follow-up review to assess Hillside's program modification efforts, and to report their finding to the superintendent by February 1, 2007.

The review team gathered data on Hillside and asked Hillside's staff to respond to questions about the distinctiveness of their educational program as set forth in Alternative School Review Criterion 1. We then visited Hillside on Thursday, 1/24/07 from 11:30 AM to 4:30 PM. During that time we had an initial meeting with Hillside's teachers and principal, observed each of Hillside's classrooms (our guides for our school visit were three 5<sup>th</sup> grade students), and concluded the day with a meeting with the teachers, principal, and parents.

## The School Visit

### What we looked for:

Hillside's written response to Criterion 1 (Appendix 1) presented us with a framework for an integrated and sequential K-5 curriculum with a specific and in-depth international studies focus. Furthermore, in accordance to the Board's direction that their program modification be an actual program *modification* and not a completely new and/or unrelated program, the document explains how their global emphasis is a significantly enhanced exploration of elements that had previously been a part of their curriculum but now were being brought to the fore in a systematic, sequential, and integrated way, grades K through 5. However, because the document did not include specific examples to explain and illustrate the various curriculum components referred to in the text, it was unclear to us exactly how, and to what degree, their international studies focus was actually being implemented.

To help us better understand the school's progress in creating and implementing their international studies focus, we asked the staff and students a number of clarifying questions during our school visit, and looked for specific evidence of:

- Grade-level global units of study;
- If and how the global units were integrated and coordinated throughout the school;
- A systematic and sequential progression of global concepts and skills;
- Use of technology;

- If and how the afternoon block related to or integrated with the international studies focus;
- If and how the all-school assemblies and Friday rotations support the school's international studies focus;
- Cross-sharing among grades and peer instruction; and,
- How their values emphasis is presented and integrated into the curriculum.

### **What we found:**

As mentioned above, in their effort to identify and develop a distinctive educational strategy for achieving the board's educational goals (Criterion 1), the Hillside staff chose to emphasize and strengthen the international studies component of their program. We found evidence of this curricular emphasis throughout the school.

At each grade level, teachers choose global units of study that are developmentally appropriate for their age groups, and then integrate those units with their regular curriculum (i.e., reading, math, geography, social studies, science, etc). Additionally, the teachers work together to coordinate their global units across grade levels, thereby making their international studies focus a significant curriculum organizer for the entire school program.

The presentation of global units seems to be designed in a way that can systematically lead the students through a sequential progression of concepts and skills, K through 5. In their response to Criterion 1 and in our conversations during the school visit, the teachers described this progression as an integrated and articulated curriculum that builds on prior learning as it spirals vertically through the grades.

We observed elements of this during our school visit. From Kindergarten through fifth grade, the global units progressed in difficulty and complexity, and seemed to build on the studies from the preceding grades. For example, the tasks progressed from making a plaster model of the earth and identifying the continents in 1<sup>st</sup> grade through the in-depth study of individual countries in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. We observed the 1<sup>st</sup> graders painting models of the continents they had made with poster board and clay and then identifying and pasting names on the individual continents; in fifth grade we observed students investigating and reporting on social, economic, artistic and political aspects of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Technology seems to be used in the standard ways, i.e., for research on the internet and for writing/presenting reports. The teachers are exploring the possibilities of expanding their use of technology into areas such as creating email protocols for having student pen pals in countries they are studying.

Although we did not observe them during our visit, the staff reports that all-school activities such as assemblies and book of the month<sup>1</sup> are also tied to global units. They cited as an example an assembly in which a community member discussed and showed a video of his trip to Kenya prior to a 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> grade unit on Kenya. The teachers also gave us examples of how the book of the month and various art projects support and enhance their international emphasis.

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<sup>1</sup> All children in the school read the same book -- older children read the book individually while younger children experience the book through read-alouds with their teacher.

We also observed evidence of what the teachers refer to as cross-sharing, in which students across grade levels attend each other's classroom presentations, and then share that information with their own classes. During our visit, four 3<sup>rd</sup> graders attended a classroom presentation by two 5<sup>th</sup> grade students on the Democratic Republic of the Congo and seemed to be taking copious notes in preparation for a presentation to their own class about what they had learned.

Although it is not unique to Hillside, we note that in every class we observed evidence of teachers and students discussing or including in various ways what they refer to as "ethiskills", i.e., the values around positive and constructive interpersonal interactions.

In our initial conversation with the teachers and principal, and then again in our concluding meeting with the teachers, principal, and parents, it was clear to us that Hillside's efforts in modifying their curriculum continues to reflect the strong school value on parent-student-teacher communication and cooperation – what Hillside refers to as the *triangular relationship*.

### Discussion

We note that Hillside continues to present an effective school program for their students in many of the same ways we identified in last years review: the school demonstrates strong classroom instruction and a caring, respectful school climate, and enjoys strong parent support and participation.

This year, in response to the Board's directive to pursue program modification in order to identify and strengthen elements of the school program that represent distinctive educational strategies, Hillside has worked diligently to create and implement an increased and coherent school-wide focus on international studies. The interviews and observations described above indicate that the Hillside staff has made substantial progress in doing so.

Being only one year into their expanded focus, this effort is obviously a work in progress. While the staff acknowledges the need for continued development of their international studies focus, the commitment, cooperation, and competence all seem to be in place to effectively move forward. As became clear in our conversations with them, Hillside's teachers seem genuinely excited about their curriculum, and believe that becoming more knowledgeable about the world, its geography, its peoples, and its cultures is vitally important in today's world. Their progress this year, as evidenced by their steps towards effectively integrating their global focus throughout the school, indicates a strong desire and capacity for further refining and implementing their international studies curriculum.

Additionally, we note that the teachers indicated, and the principal confirmed, that the teachers engage regularly in collaborative meetings about their curriculum and about instruction. We believe this is important because one of the main components of effective schools is a cohesive staff in which teachers are all on the same page about values, expectations, and instruction, and for which open practice<sup>2</sup> is a norm of the school's culture in practice as well as in theory. It is clear that Hillside's staff is on the same page about values and expectations, and it appears that they are moving toward a model of open practice. We encourage that, and hope that they will continue to pursue and develop a strong school-wide norm of open practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Teachers working with, sharing, and helping each other, specifically in terms of classroom instruction.

Given the opportunity to move forward, Hillside teachers express a firm commitment to further refining their curriculum, and a keen interest in potentially expanding their efforts towards becoming an elementary *International Baccalaureate* (IB) program. The principal is supportive of the staff and of their goals.

### **Conclusion**

The evidence indicates that Hillside has taken meaningful and viable steps towards creating and implementing a distinctive curriculum that enhances the district's educational program.

At the time of our school visit, the international focus of Hillside's curriculum was being systematically and effectively implemented in as far as it went. The teachers acknowledge that the program needs to be refined and expanded to reach its maximum potential, and it appears to us that the staff shares the goals, visions and expectations about their curriculum's international focus to be able to do so. Their principal concurs that the staff is working as an extremely cohesive unit, and verified that the staff is working together in a dedicated, sustained, and consistent manner to continuously improve and refine their international studies curriculum and the teaching and learning around that curriculum.

Hillside School (submitted by school)  
Review-January 2007

Criterion 1: Does the alternative school/educational program represent a “distinctive strategy” for achieving the board’s educational goals as defined in the board’s adopted goals, guiding beliefs and values, and educational philosophy statement?

**1.a How does the alternative school’s program compare to the originally approved charter or proposal?**

Hillside School was originally proposed as “Fundamental Alternative School,” and was also called “Traditional Alternative School.” It was proposed by parents in 1976, as a response to trends in education that were experimental and straying dramatically from the focus on the basic and core academic skills and proven effective instructional techniques.

Our original proposal from 1976, introduces our position statement: An alternative based on fundamental education would fill a need in this community felt by many parents and educators. This type of educational program would provide the disciplined environment many parents are seeking for their children at this time. These parents desire a school emphasizing above all else the mastery of basic skills of language, math, and reading.

- Hillside was founded on, and continues to support a strong triangular relationship between the students, teachers, and parents. We have continued to implement an agreement that is signed by the student and parent which affirms and supports the responsibility of each triad member.
- The philosophy of Hillside Traditional School is that the child learns best through a structured and positive learning environment. We seek to develop within the student maximum individual potential, positive self-concept, and a strong social responsibility to the school community. We achieve this through a specific behavior policy and high expectations, a rigorous academic program with homework requirements, and character development.
- When a student and family join Hillside and become involved with their kindergarten teacher, they grow to learn about their classmates and the Hillside family. This early start at Hillside begins community awareness and support, and carries with the student through their education at Hillside. Families and older students educate each other about traditions and expectations of the school. Students who enter Hillside in later grades are welcomed by their peers and families. Immediately, new students learn about the strong community and responsibility for each other.
- Family members have always been expected to take active roles in their students’ and classmates’ education. Families are asked to contribute 8-10 volunteer hours throughout the school year to contribute to the school community. Families can and do participate in a variety of ways, before, during or after school hours.
- When students leave Hillside, they are noted as having high expectations in work ethics and organization, responsibility toward achievement, cultural competency and global awareness. They have developed the skills and confidence to be accountable citizens in their local and extended community.

The Hillside student becomes an active reader, writer, information seeker, creative problem solver, and responsible citizen. By maintaining high expectations for success, behavior, and academic performance, students are engaged, invested, connected, and active in their own education.

**1.b To what extent and how does the alternative school or program emphasize a specific element of the district's approved curriculum?**

The traditional role of strong core academics and protected instructional time has been adopted by most schools in the district these past few years, therefore at Hillside we have broadened and strengthened our scope to distinguish ourselves even further. We are pleased that 4j District and the State of Oregon have seen value in our program of core academics instruction and protected instructional time and have credited our school as "exceptional" since the report card system has been implemented.

- The curriculum is teacher directed with strong input from parents. We use resources and academic programs that 4j has provided. In conjunction with district curriculum, Hillside staff has developed integrated global, language, and cultural components from their teachers' studies and experiences to use with their students through the grades. Teachers have become role models for students learning and practicing responsibility as world citizens and they gain exposure to new concepts within a context.

With the changes brought on by technology, our curriculum helps students to see themselves not as isolationists, but rather as problem solvers in their local and global communities.

**1.c To what extent does Hillside present the district's approved curriculum in a sequence different from the order of presentation in other schools?**

Hillside's presentation of the curriculum is regarded as challenging, in depth, and at times advanced. Teachers are able to provide accelerated curriculum effectively and successfully due to the nature and structure of the program. Since its inception, Hillside has always protected instructional time, which supports the faster pacing, continuity, and delivery of the program. Parents recognize, demand, and support this feature by their commitment to the triangular relationship of Hillside's design.

- The teachers work to provide consistent and solid foundations for each grade and school level making sure that students are prepared as life long learners. Each grade selects a global area for its integrated focus and this curriculum is coordinated throughout the school. With ongoing articulation of the curriculum, teachers have designed a sequence of concepts and skills through which students progress.
- The K-5 student participates in a variety of integrated learning experiences: geography, history, language, cooking, music, biographies, storytelling, women's history, drama, community service, and art of world cultures. This learning may spiral through the grades or be specific to a grade without unnecessary repetition. Students know about and look forward to these communal traditions as they move through the grades together.

**1.d To what extent and how does the alternative school/program, group students for instruction in some unique manner?**

Due to the removal of grade caps as of 2006, Hillside is no longer a self contained, non-blended program. However, there is a strong cohesion among students in this program, and there are still groupings that uniquely occur at Hillside throughout year, grade, and school.

- Students meet for all-school assemblies with an international focus that has emerged from our diverse family connections and interests. The speakers for these assemblies come not only from our own community, but the Eugene community and the University of Oregon International Students program.

- The cross sharing of learning among all grade levels is practiced through frequent events and presentations which all classes attend. As the students participate, they learn from each other and reflect their strong community bonds. These activities stimulate caring for the younger children, leadership among the upper grades, respectful participation, audience practice for all, and accountability for knowledge and their peers. Students serve as role models for public speaking skills, confidence building, and character development. Hillside students are expected to understand that they are held accountable for one another's learning and how they each contribute to the world. With this cross sharing, learning is enhanced for both sets of students. Additionally, the older students feel responsible to convey the information they have learned to the younger students. Through this arrangement students know other students at all of the grade levels. Due to this familiarity and support of one another, there is no intimidation by older students of the younger, and in fact, younger students will seek out students of any age to engage and play with. Students are comfortable with each other because they know and are actively involved in one another's learning.

- Hillside's student body is composed of a wide range of learners. The classroom teachers must show and practice effective differentiation of instruction to meet individual needs. Students are successful wherever they fall on the spectrum because their families and teachers communicate essential information through weekly teacher and school newsletters, phone calls, daily or weekly reports and email. Because of the commitment of all parties through the triangular relationship, the majority of families have ongoing communication throughout the year.

- Literacy is a common thread throughout the school with the book of the month, classroom buddy reading, and a variety of shared projects.

- Children who utilize our Regional Learning Center and Life Skills program benefit from Hillside's structure, community of responsibility for each other and high expectations. The compassion and character building that goes on at Hillside, helps these students and families to feel connected and welcomed as a valued member of the community.

**1e. To what extent and how do the alternative school/program's teachers emphasize a specific instructional strategy?**

Hillside continues to implement the teaching strategy outlined in the original proposal (1976) which states:

Learning in the school will be teacher-directed rather than student directed...with one teacher accountable for the achievement of the class...planning and structure will be emphasized...daily schedules will be posted in each room...Achievement will be emphasized over the concept of 'all learning has to be fun'... Each student should be challenged to do his or her best, to learn to handle failure as well as success, and to use a controlled, competitive spirit within a framework of mutual respect, cooperation, and regard for the worth and rights of others...

- Peer Instruction - Hillside practices teacher-directed supervised peer instruction within classrooms and across grades. This provides students of different grade levels a chance to bond and form a sense of community and promotes leadership skills and character building. In Superintendent Russell's response, February 9, 2005, "Identifying positive mentoring opportunities for older students with younger students... foster(s) leadership skills among adolescents."

- Integration of Curriculum - Hillside's original and global curriculum instructs students in such a way that they develop cultural competence, strong character, and social responsibility.

- Daily Design - The classes follow the same structure during the day. The morning block of time is dedicated to the core and basic skills that students need to acquire. This includes literacy, math, writing and language arts. The afternoon block of the day is dedicated to global studies, foreign languages, science, field trips, music, technology, and physical education. All staff and parents are committed to the structure. Many classes teach the same curricular areas at the same time of the morning.
- Monthly Design - The school and classes employ a unique monthly design as well. Classes have Friday Rotations in which each Friday of the month K-5 students engage in specific events that rotate through the weeks: book of the month, cultural assemblies, music instruction, or art docents.
- Field Trips - These are well thought out and build upon or extend the learning of our students. All excursions are tied directly to lessons, units, or school-wide curriculum. Students who experience outside enrichment activities or travel are strongly encouraged to share their knowledge and experiences with their school community.
- Character and Values - While all families feel that values are important, teachers, parents, and students at Hillside feel it is a necessary part of the curriculum and instruction. Traditional values are a part of all curricular areas at Hillside. While students are expected to always use the 4 Bs, they are also expected to display ethiskills in their daily school life. These skills go beyond the 4 Bs and help students to achieve an important piece of who they are and who they want to be. They help to remind each other of these skills and values and why they are important in their job as a student at Hillside.
- The Hillside One Teacher Model - This strategy allows students to be with the same teacher most of the day with no loss of instructional time due to transitions between teachers and rooms. The teacher, volunteers, and instructional aides have sole responsibility for the class and no student can get lost in the process. The teacher facilitates the transition of students to the next grade by meeting with the next grade teacher at the end of the year and throughout the following year, to discuss needs and progress. This process is aided by teacher familiarity with students based on all school and cross grade events.
- Evolution of Program- The back to basics model which helped form the original Hillside Alternative School, with classes seated in rows doing worksheets, has transformed. “The Basics” have evolved as our society has changed. Yet what most people consider the traditional skills has remained the same. We still instruct the three Rs to our students because they are valued and necessary. However, the basics in world expectations and values have expanded over many years to include creative thinking, problem solving, global awareness and conscientious citizens. Our original philosophy from 1976 includes all of these skills and creates a picture of a globally aware and highly skilled student we still foster today.