

Visit to Gideon Welles School
November 30th, 2018

A Westport team visited the Gideon Welles School, located at 1029 Neipsic Road in Glastonbury, Connecticut.

Overall School Structure and Operations:

The School is a 6th grade only school, and occupies a building that was constructed over 50 years ago as a middle school and had a building update in the early 2000's. The campus houses about 400 students, 50 certified staff and 100 staff total. A retired police officer provides security. The academic day runs from 7:55 – 2:35.

Students are arranged on four teams, each team named for a body of water: Yukon, Congo, Tigris and Rio Grande. These names pay homage to the building's namesake – Gideon Welles, who was the Navy Admiral serving under President Lincoln. A fifth team – Irrawaddy – comprises all specials teachers. The school sports teams play under the name "Navigators". Class size averages about 24 students per class and each team has a double period of English, one each for reading and writing. These reading and writing periods follow the Teacher's College workshop model. Periods meet in the same order every day.

As we toured the school, both during changing of classes and when classes were in session, there was an organized, calm feeling at all times. Students seemed to travel through the corridors with the pep of younger students, some stopping at lockers. Lockers are not locked and all hallways contained helpful locker tips on posters and each student opening a locker also had the visible tips posted. The school is implementing PBIS and many of the shared rules for conduct and well-being are visible throughout the common spaces. There is a large push for student advocacy, and there is work built around students speaking directly to teachers about grades. The grading system they use is PowerSchool.

Staff also appear calm and content. Upon our arrival a staff member who was aware we were visiting, greeted us and pointed out some of the nice things about the front of the school that make it a great place for her to spend her days. Office staff was equally friendly, as were all teaching and support staff we encountered. The Principal, Mr. Hurlburt shared that staff satisfaction is very high. During our tour, we were also able to briefly speak with the team leader whose team was running a coat drive, and she spoke highly about her experience as a seasoned teacher at Gideon Welles.

Academically, during regular schedule, students participate in 8 periods a day – each about 43 minutes long, including one period for homeroom (10 min), lunch (23 min) and a 10 minute move break (recess), and then end the day with a 9th period, "STAR" which is for specials (art, band, chorus, orchestra and PE) or other activities an individual might need in their day. There is a 2 minute passing time. Each team follows a personalized variant of this schedule in order to ensure that each team of teachers has a different

shared team planning block that administrators join at least once weekly to talk about student needs. Team Irrawaddy – the team of specials teachers – also has team planning time as well as personal planning time. In addition to the regular schedule, the administration has provided a Duplicate Assembly Schedule for school-wide meetings, an early dismissal and a delayed opening schedule (both of which have students attending every period in a shortened format), and also a Booster Schedule where an extra block is inserted so that teams can work on community “give-back” type projects such as a coat drive for another school district. PBIS lessons are planned for the entire year, with lessons and topics pre-planned and a calendar for those provided for all. One topic that was briefly mentioned was around public speaking. These are advertised as ‘town hall meetings.’ Foreign languages include Spanish (which is started in elementary school), French, and Chinese. Three out of the four teams include a resource teacher. There is a sensory room as well. The district is committed to a full inclusion model; however, another district school houses the LINKS program, which is a self-contained environment for k-12 students who require more intensive programming. A language teacher is attached to each team, and this engenders a strong connection for success in language for all students, even those with language challenges. There is also a full time reading teacher and a Para for the school and a math interventionist 4 days a week. All students use an IPAD. Administration meets at least weekly with each team, and utilizes the Kim Marshall evaluation plan to structure formal monitoring of academics. The school uses standards-based grading.

Outside of academics, students enjoy after-school activities, supported by an activity bus for a late ride home. There are over 20 offerings for students. Transportation is shared with 7th and 8th graders after-school. Glastonbury owns its own school buses.

Social- Emotional considerations:

The school leadership team is comprised of seasoned professionals who have enjoyed time in other grade configurations and are familiar with traditional middle school models as well as K-6, 1-6, k-2, 3-5 models. The primary benefit of the 6th grade only school that surfaced throughout our conversations was the safety of not worrying about emulating older students and fitting in. Everyone mentioned how difficult the transition from elementary school and “childhood” into pre-adolescence is and how much brain development is taking place. The 6th graders at Gideon Welles are described as enjoying the transition to adolescence at their own pace. Incoming 5th graders love it – they come back years later to visit as high schoolers and report that 6th grade was their favorite year. Parents also report that 6th grade has been their child’s best experience and the parent survey supports this.

Supporting Transitions

For students, 6th grade is the first year with school counselors. The School Psychologist is the team leader for mental health, and that team comprises the school psychologist and school counselors. Social Workers are employed by the Town of Glastonbury and assigned to each district school on a rotating basis to provide town services. Each student

receives at least one meeting first quarter. However, transition begins in April of the 5th grade year, when the mental health team begins meeting with the mental health team in each elementary school to discuss placement of each individual students. A parallel process exists for teaching teams to share information. Students in the SRBI process are carefully transitioned. The mental health team describes the fact that all students from the five district elementary school come together and forge new friendships as a real benefit so that by 7th grade everyone knows each other and there is no stress about moving to the next campus. In the spring of the year 5th grade students also visit Gideon Welles for one half day and receive a presentation in the auditorium. They also tour the school with student ambassadors who welcome them. In advance of the student tours parents are invited to a parent information night in March which is for parents only. They review the schedule and there is a question and answer period where information is provided about child development and social emotional concerns.

The school makes time in its schedule for reminders like “cafeteria etiquette”, “iPad expectations”, and “hall behavior.” A big part of the curriculum teaches students how to use a planner and organize a binder.

Transitioning into 7th grade begins in January with a few different days in which students learn the general information about their new school, i.e. different classes, expectations, etc. This is in a school assembly format. In February, students make online class selections through PowerSchool. The team structure stays the same when they move into 7th grade, including languages. In March, students meet in smaller groups with school counselors to go over sample schedules and talk about transitioning with counselors. This small group meeting is optional. Then, students go up to the 7/8 school by teams to receive tours, go over general information, and have lunch. Teams may stay similar depending on the language (like French or Mandarin). Then, in preparation for PPTs and 504s, school counselors have a department meeting dedicated to speaking about any pertinent 504 and PPT information.

Impressions:

The Gideon Welles team strongly conveyed their appreciation of the grade 6 only model. During the 6th grade year it is obvious that students need and are ready for increasing responsibility and independence. They adjust well to the idea of letter grades. The idea of the school “funneling” all Glastonbury students into one container where new a new cohort can be created that will then move together to grade 7 has true appeal. I took away that this environment acts as a peer incubator where students can evolve into pre-adolescents while having one foot in the world of childhood. The school counselors spoke to the idea of why an all 6th grade school is beneficial, and they stated that 6th graders need more independence and responsibility, which speaks to why 6th grade may not be best suited in a K-6 model. The school counselors also spoke to the need for 6th graders to have a transitional period in which they learned basic executive functioning skills, like organizing their binders, using their planners, etc. The impression that I got from this facility was that this was exactly the place a 6th grade

student needs to build those life skills in a positive, safe, and supportive environment before moving on to 7th and 8th grade.

Submitted by: Tina Mannarino