



Comal ISD

Advanced Academics Newsletter

Fall/Winter 2011



Comal ISD Makes AP® Honor Roll

There's cause for celebration in Comal Independent School District! Comal ISD is one of fewer than 400 public school districts in the nation being honored by the College Board with a place on the 2nd annual AP® Honor Roll, for simultaneously increasing access to Advanced Placement coursework while maintaining or increasing the percentage of students earning scores of 3 or higher on AP exams. Comal ISD increased the number of students participating in AP from 623 to 817, while improving the percentage of students earning AP Exam scores of 3 or higher from 47% in 2009 to 48% in 2011. This is a great achievement and evidence that CISD is doing great things to increase students' college readiness and their chances for success in adult life.

Comal ISD GT Parent Survey Results

In May of 2011, Comal ISD Advanced Academics conducted a GT parent survey, the results of which indicated that parents are generally well-satisfied with the district's current GT program. The survey was conducted online, through Survey Monkey, and solicited 194 parent responses to questions ranging from student assessment and access, to overall program design, to the specific strengths and weaknesses of the district's GT program.

Survey results indicated that 91.7% of respondents are aware of GT procedures and services; 93.8% strongly agree or agree that services are available to all student populations; 79.7% strongly agree or agree that students receive an array of learning experiences; 81.2% strongly agree or agree that the curriculum and instructional approach is appropriately challenging; and 92.7% strongly agree or agree that GT teachers are approachable and responsive.

Parents identified high-quality teachers, challenging project-based learning opportunities, and student enjoyment as GT program strengths while they saw limited pullout time, large class sizes, the absence of content specific services at middle/high school, and limited parent-teacher communication at middle/high school as GT program weaknesses.

Survey results were presented and discussed at the Advanced Academics Advisory Committee meeting on October 18, 2011.



Advanced Academics Advisory Committee Fall Meeting

The Advanced Academics Advisory Committee held its first meeting of the school year on October 18, 2011, where the Committee heard five reports on GT programs in districts deemed by TEA to be demographically similar to Comal ISD. Laura Linhart-Kistner reported on Katy ISD, Keller ISD, and Lake Travis ISD. Stephanie Quinn reported on Boerne ISD, and Teresa Taylor Partridge reported on Northwest ISD. A discussion of the GT programs in these other districts focused on how students qualify for GT services, as well as the kinds of services students receive when they do qualify for GT.

Several specific topics of interest were discussed at length. These topics included methods for the identification of low SES students; what a qualifying score should be; how many qualifying scores should be required; and whether GT services should be general or content specific.

As Comal ISD continues its focus on improving services for GT students, the Advanced Academics Advisory Committee agreed that additional time for discussion and strategic planning was necessary. Consequently, a strategic planning day was scheduled for December 14, 2011.

College Algebra Dual Credit Making a Difference for Students

In its ongoing effort to increase dual credit opportunities for students, CISD offers a year-long College Algebra course that grants dual credit for the spring semester. College Algebra is a 4th year math course that is especially helpful to students who are not pursuing technical majors in college but who would like to fulfill their math requirement while still in high school.

AP® Course and Exam Revisions Implemented by College Board

The 2011-2012 academic year brings revisions to AP courses and exams in three disciplines—French Language and Culture; German Language and Culture; and World History.

The AP French and AP German exams will continue to feature multiple-choice and free-response questions but will also now feature a speaking component designed to assess a student's proficiency in interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational communication.

The AP World History exam will also continue to feature multiple-choice and free-response questions, but the focus will be on key historical concepts and themes, thinking skills that include crafting historical arguments from historical evidence; chronological reasoning; comparison and contextualization; and historical interpretation and synthesis.

Changes to select AP science courses and exams will take effect during the 2012-2013 academic year. As with AP French, AP German, and AP World History, the revised courses and exams will reflect a shift in focus from content to skills, emphasizing a student's ability to question; investigate; problem solve; and to collect, analyze, and interpret data within the context of scientific theory.



Spring Cycle GT Screening Process Currently Under Way

The GT screening process for Comal ISD's Gifted and Talented Education Program is currently under way with the solicitation of student referrals. Under Texas law, gifted/talented kindergarten students must be identified and begin receiving services by March 1st. Kindergarten referrals are due by December 12th with formal testing taking place December through February, and with parents being notified prior to March 1st.

Referrals for students in grades 1-11 are due by January 30th with testing taking place February through April, and parents being notified by May 1st. Gifted/talented services for students currently in grades 1-11 will begin in the fall of 2012. Referral forms are available on the Comal ISD Gifted and Talented website and at your child's campus.

Learning is the Common Thread: Notes on ISM

Carolyn Pittman

What do kidney dissection, brain mapping, writing comedy or science fiction and experimentation on smoke and burn effects all have in common? They are all student projects for a Comal ISD course called Independent Study Mentorship or "ISM."

ISM offers a nontraditional learning experience to students who have the ability to create innovative products or performances. Such students work individually with a mentor to complete field work/visits, interviews and research in areas of individual interest. At the end of the year, ISM students present a portfolio, which is a compilation of all their work and research and make a public presentation to a professional audience, including experts in their field of study. Course projects, if of a professional quality, may meet the Advanced Measures requirement of the Distinguished Achievement Program.

Mrs. Carolyn Pittman is the teacher/facilitator of this innovative course. She reports, "We are all excited to be participating in this program! The students are excited because they are experiencing real-world learning that will benefit their future, and watching students get 'turned-on' to learning is what excites me!"

This year ISM students are working with physicians both in private medical practice and at UTSA Medical Center, and Brooke Army Medical Center. One student is working with a mentor at the New Braunfels Writer's Guild. Student projects include:

1. Studying kidney dialysis medications and the different effects on adults versus children.
2. Writing a science fiction novel and researching different methods to approach writing.
3. Researching specialized software to write code utilized in the brain mapping of epileptic seizures.
4. Studying different styles of comedy and writing a comedy novel.
5. Analyzing and reporting laboratory results in the study of smoke and burn effects in order to develop new protocols for military safety.

GT “Here and There”

Kinder Ranch and Rahe Bulverde

Mrs. Metzger’s GT classes in grades 3-5 at Kinder Ranch and Rahe Bulverde are immersed in the “History of Flight.” Each student created a pair of wings as a culminating activity after studying the anatomy of birds and why they can fly. (Pictures of students’ wings can be found on the KRES and RBES websites.) Students then moved on to the history of kites where they made tetrahedron and Delta Christmas kites. Next, students will study the history of hot air balloons. In January they will be creating hot air balloons that really fly.

Students in grades 1-2 are learning how to do research. They are focusing on animals, with birds being the first area of study. Students completed a unit on eagles and will be moving on to owls. They will dissect owl pellets in January as part of their study.

Arlon Seay and Garden Ridge

Mrs. Erben’s 5th grade GT students at Arlon Seay Elementary have been helping younger students learn technology skills through a “Tech Buddy” program. Each week, 5th grade students have been pairing up with 1st grade students to teach them how to make a slide show using Keynote. Fifth grade students at Garden Ridge Elementary are learning about the judicial system and will be holding a mock trial.

Third grade students at both Arlon Seay and Garden Ridge Elementary are making “travel shows.” Each student researched to find interesting information about a country. They planned scenes in the show using a storyboard and then filmed each other, using Flip Video cameras in front of a green screen. Students are now editing their films to create their shows, using iMovie. They are learning how to use green screen technology and “picture in a picture” to make their shows more interesting.

Fourth grade students at Arlon Seay and Garden Ridge created digital stories using Microsoft Photo Story 3. They wrote a story about an experience they had. Then they used a storyboard to plan their illustrations. They collected photos or drew pictures to go with the story and scanned pictures to create the multimedia stories, complete with music and recordings of their own voices reading their stories.

Second grade students at Arlon Seay and Garden Ridge have been learning about Madagascar and the animals that are endemic to that island country. They even had Madagascar hissing cockroaches visit their class for a while.

First grade students at Arlon Seay are learning about the rainforest and are researching to learn about animals that live in the rainforest. They are writing and illustrating a book about what they are learning.

Goodwin Frazier and Oak Creek

At both Goodwin Frazier and Oak Creek Elementary, Mrs. Tabler’s 4th grade GT students have completed and presented their independent projects. Each student chose a researchable question on a topic of his/her choice, followed the steps of the research process, and then wrote a report. The next step was to choose a project to illustrate what had been learned. Students chose a wide variety of topics and projects, including a cheerleading game board, a model of the Lost City of Atlantis, and a keynote about George Lucas.

Fifth grade students at Goodwin Frazier and Oak Creek are exploring the topic of power. Each student chose a person from Forbes List of Powerful People and presented information using a website called “The Museum Box.”

