

**Senate Education Committee
Academic Efforts Testimony**

**Mariemont City School District, Hamilton County
Steven Estep, Superintendent**

April 9, 2024

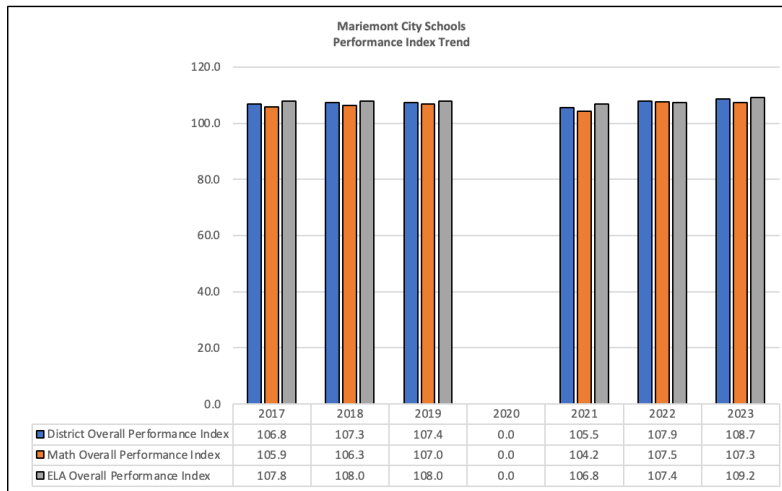
Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the academic efforts of the Mariemont City School District during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

My name is Steven Estep and I serve as the Superintendent for the Mariemont City School District in Hamilton County. I have been the superintendent in Mariemont for eleven years, and I am in my twenty-eighth year in education.

The Mariemont City School District is a suburban school district in the Cincinnati area serving the communities of Columbia Township, Fairfax, Mariemont and Terrace Park. The district serves approximately 1,600 students across four buildings – two elementary schools, one junior high school and one high school. Mariemont City Schools has a long history of exemplary academic performance, and we are proud to have all four of our schools named National Blue Ribbon Schools (one school earning this distinction on the heels of the pandemic in fall 2021).

Like all school districts across our state and nation, the Mariemont City School District was not and continues to not be immune from the COVID-19 pandemic impact on our students and the academic environment.

However, I am proud to share that our story is a celebration of how, although not easily, we have and continue to successfully navigate the academic, emotional, social and behavioral challenges brought on by the pandemic to maintain our tradition of strong academic performance.



Note: The Performance Index is a key metric of the School Report Cards issued by the State of Ohio. It represents the academic achievement of all students beyond basic proficiency. All test data for a school or district is aggregated and weighted based on performance level to provide an overall view of Achievement. The above chart displays the Performance Index of Mariemont City Schools since 2017 and shows the district has consistently maintained a high performance.

Our System

The ability to keep our school district's academic performance strong was not accidental and resulted from an intentional and purposeful *system* that we had established long before the pandemic to keep academic achievement and the well-being of our students as our most important work. And most notable about this system is the accountability and expectations we place not only on the outputs, but also on the inputs.

Prior to, during and, now, after the pandemic, the *system* we have in place in Mariemont City Schools has eight core components:

- (1) A clear instructional strategic plan (*Destination 2026*) that outlines the standard and expectation for the academic experience we hold and expect for all students, regardless of school and/or grade level.
- (2) An annual District Action Plan with specific objectives, priorities and actions for the school year in response to data gaps, trends, mandates, research and other opportunities.
- (3) A common lens that we all share for what quality instruction and highly engaged students should look like in all of our classrooms.
- (4) Agreed upon Key Performance Indicators for student success that we measure, monitor and respond to on a frequent basis in a variety of ways; most notably, we have a collaboration team model in every school building in which administrators, teachers and instructional specialists carefully track assessment data down to the individual student to make targeted decisions about how to meet each student's needs.
- (5) Robust intervention and enrichment services, both during and beyond the school day, to meet individual student needs and promote academic achievement growth.
- (6) Strong mental health services and programming to assist students and their families in navigating mental health, social and emotional challenges.
- (7) Powerful experiential learning to take students beyond the walls of our classrooms to find and explore interests and careers.
- (8) Rigorous professional development for administrators, teachers and staff on researched, best practices that includes purposeful coaching by highly qualified support personnel in the areas of literacy, mathematics, gifted learning, intervention and technology.

It was and continues today to be within this well-established *system* and its eight components that we are able to zig and zag, in many instances, proactively, to ensure we best meet the needs of our students. And the changing conditions brought on by the pandemic certainly gave us cause to make adjustments – but, in the end, it was this *system* that allowed us to thrive.

Within months of the pandemic starting, we wasted no time to implement high dosage tutoring for our neediest students, particularly in our primary grades, through a summer *Jumpstart Program* that provided intense remedial instruction in literacy and mathematics. This was in addition to the intensive tutoring we had been offering our students through learning labs in our elementary schools since 2012 and continue today.

We also provided summer professional development to our staff through a *Jumpstart Academy* to teach them strategies in literacy, mathematics, technology and interventions so that they could be prepared to meet the needs of our students as they re-entered our classrooms after spending the spring months in lockdown and remote learning.

And though I am confident that these swift and proactive measures allowed us to quickly regain our footing after significant disruption, it is how we have continued to zig and zag within our *system* that has allowed us to recover any learning loss and maintain strong academic performance.

Mental Health

Before I address specific academic strategies that we have implemented, I would be remiss if I did not share with you the tremendous energy, time and resources that we have poured into our students to ensure they are in a position where they are able and willing to learn. Certainly in the throes of the pandemic, but even yet today, we are seeing mental health issues, behavioral challenges and emotional and social deficiencies unlike anything we had experienced prior to the spring of 2020.

Thankfully, strong mental health services and programs have long been a part of our *system*, and continuing this focus has been paramount in the recovery of our students – and quite frankly, has become a necessity to get many of our students in a place where they are mentally, emotionally and behaviorally ready to learn.

In addition to pouring more energy and resources into established programs and services like mental health therapy provided in-house by our community partners Child Focus and Mindpeace, supporting students through our Sources of Strength initiative and assessing student wellness through the Signs of Suicide program, we have also: (1) increased the amount of school counselors in our buildings; (2) employed registered behavior technicians to assist students with severe behavior and emotional challenges; and (3) implemented a comprehensive Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports program (PBIS) across all grade levels.

Signs of Suicide Data Class of 2024 Cohort

8th grade (Jan. 2020)	10th grade (Jan. 2022)	12th grade (March 2024)
72% of students were in the low or no risk category for suicide. 28% of the students were in the moderate to high risk category for suicide. We made 13 referrals to our mental health partner for services and had to create 5 safety plans for students who were at immediate risk for suicide.	81% of students were in the low or no risk category for suicide. 19% of the students were in the moderate to high risk category for suicide. All but 2 students were receiving services and referrals to our mental health partner were made for those 2 students.	83% of students were in the low or no risk category for suicide. 17% of students were in the moderate to high risk category for suicide, but all of those students were already receiving services.

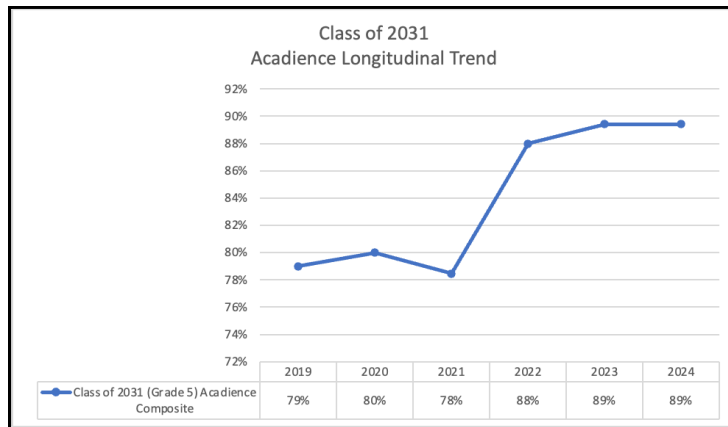
Note: Mariemont City Schools began implementing the Signs of Suicide program in 2016 and the Sources of Strength peer-to-peer suicide prevention program in 2018 because of the data that our school counselors were providing and their concerns for student wellness.

Academics

We have and continue to make adjustments within our *system* to our academic program in response to analysis of our Key Performance Indicators to ensure student needs are met, and I would like to share some examples with you.

First, in literacy.

In 2016, we became concerned with what we were observing in our data; we were seeing large numbers of students needing reading intervention services in grades k-6. Through the work of our collaboration teams, we discovered that we had an issue in our core instruction, so we immediately went to work to make changes to core instructional materials, intervention resources and diagnostic assessments. We created a K-12 literacy leadership team and shifted literacy coaching and teacher professional development to be aligned to the science of reading and structured literacy. Additionally, we added intervention courses at the secondary level to intervene with students who had gaps in literacy learning.



Note: Mariemont City Schools utilizes Acadience to benchmark students in Reading three times annually. The chart above displays the percentage of students in the Class of 2031 (current 5th grade students) meeting or exceeding the Fall Benchmark for their Reading Composite Score. The Composite Score is a combination of how the student performed on various subtests aligned to the skills associated with reading development, such as: Oral Reading Fluency, Nonsense Word Fluency, Phonemic Awareness and a MAZE assessment. This data illustrates the academic growth of students as a result of instructional shifts.

ESSER funds allowed us to expand intervention staffing to increase the number of students we could support, and for over four years now, we have been providing enhanced, targeted professional development to our English Language Arts teachers to ensure they have a solid understanding of best practice reading instruction.

These shifts in instruction and intervention, our intentional use of data, the support from instructional coaches and our K-12 literacy leadership team and targeted professional development brought immediate results. Of note, for the first year of the Dyslexia Law requirements, we had 32 students flagged as showing markers of dyslexia. Thirty of these students were already receiving intervention and high dosage tutoring, and the two students who were not receiving services yet were newly enrolled kindergarten students.

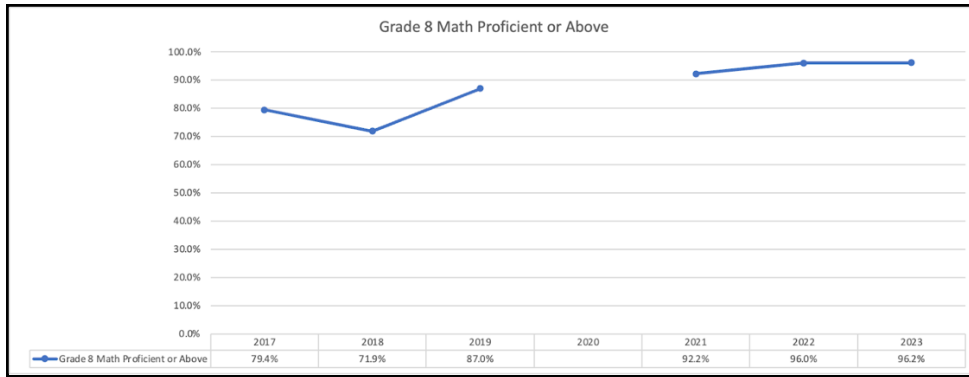
Shifting now to mathematics.

While our data analysis in literacy showed concerns for our struggling learners, our data in mathematics showed we were not effectively pushing our strongest learners. So, just like we did in literacy, we responded.

We now offer math enrichment for high achieving and gifted K-6 students through our Learning Labs. We have added a mathematics instructional coach, and we made significant adjustments in course offerings to provide acceleration opportunities in math courses grades 8-12.

Additionally, we have added a gifted intervention coordinator and now offer math enrichment groups for third and fourth grade students in our schools. We have also established a district mathematics leadership team to mirror the work of our literacy team, and professional development in math is now focused on explicit instructional strategies in the classroom.

All of these changes have transformed the way our math teachers collaborate and teach. Our mathematics programming and instruction is now much more vertically aligned, and we are positioned to continue to effectively enrich our strongest learners while we support our struggling ones.



Note: The chart above displays the percentage of students scoring Proficient or above on the 8th Grade Ohio State Test for Mathematics in Mariemont City Schools since the spring of 2017. There was no test administered in the spring of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Future Needs & Concerns

As we look to the immediate future and beyond, we have tremendous concerns for our youngest learners. Students are coming to us in kindergarten with tremendous behavioral, social and emotional needs. Additionally, a much greater number of students than we ever saw before the pandemic are starting kindergarten having not attended preschool; and we are finding many more parents in need of education and training for basic behavior management of their children.

Our teachers are having to spend so much time on these needs that, academically, students are not progressing at levels that would have been the norm prior to the pandemic, and this is forcing us to rethink our kindergarten curriculum and instructional program as we continue to zig and zag within our *system*.

More support at the state level for preschool opportunities for all children and education for parents of our youngest learners on how they can best prepare them for school is a real need for us, and I am sure Mariemont City Schools is not alone in this need.

In closing, I do want to acknowledge the work and dedication of our staff. Quite simply, without their tireless efforts to always put the needs of our kids first, none of what the Mariemont City School District has and continues to accomplish would be possible. They care deeply about our students and show it every day. I tell them all the time that I am proud to be their superintendent, and today, I want to say to you how proud I am to be the superintendent of Mariemont City Schools.

Chair Brenner and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to share with you today. I am happy to talk further at any time and can be reached at sestep@mariemontschools.org or 513.272.7500.