



School District of Altoona

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

August 15, 2016

Happy New Year! In a few weeks, school will start again, and I would like to take this time to introduce myself and to tell you about the Altoona Intermediate School, AIS. My name is Andrea Steffen, and while I am not new to the district, I am the new Intermediate School Principal and am starting my third year as the Curriculum Director. Prior to my employment here, I was a classroom teacher, special education teacher, and reading specialist. My most important role, though, is as a mom. I have three sons who attend our district, and I have a huge vested interest in our schools.

While new to the principal role for our school, because I am employed in our district, I was fortunate enough to start transitioning into this position through the second half of last school year, and I'd like to share some of the work the staff and I did and tell you more about our school. Altoona Intermediate School, *An Innovative School*, is a multi-age school made up of 4th and 5th grades. This means that all classrooms have both 4th and 5th grade students. Last spring, the staff and I worked on our vision and mission, our commitments, and our goals.

ALTOONA INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL (AIS) MISSION:

AIS is a multi-age, innovative, and progressive learning community in which all students engage in a rigorous curriculum and are held to high academic expectations. All students are provided an encouraging, safe and supportive learning environment and each child's social and emotional growth is nurtured to prepare students for their future.

OUR COMMITMENTS:

We Live It, We Breathe It, We Do It...

- We commit to creating a partnership with our students, families and community members.
- Excellence isn't a destination because excellence continues to shift. Our world is changing and shifting. We commit to being a culture of continuous improvement and growth mindset. Students and staff in our school are a collaborative community of learners.
- We commit to providing student-centered, flexible, personalized learning for all students and to become innovators in public education in order to prepare each student for a rapidly changing future.
- We commit to designing and delivering a guaranteed and viable curriculum that enhances student ownership in the learning process. Along with staff, students set learning goals and reflect on and monitor progress to reach high levels of mastery.
- We commit to fostering meaningful personal connections, fostering character development and to providing a positive and safe learning environment to enable students to learn, grow, lead and succeed.

We value the partnership between you, the parents/guardians, and our school. This is essential for the success of our children. You know your child best and our partnership will help ensure that we create a safe/nurturing environment and help us to set high expectations for his/her success. I can't speak highly enough of our staff! They are truly a community of learners. Our staff values continuous professional development and engages in learning and discussion of best teaching practices, which in turn leads to continuous improvement for our students. We also value and continue to grow in our ability to provide personalized learning. What does this mean? For many of us, when we went to school, *one* lesson was taught to all in our class. AIS staff teaches a lesson, guided by the state standards, and then differentiates the lesson to meet the needs of individual students. Some examples of this include guided reading, project based units, and quick checks which allow the teacher to determine how much background knowledge a student has in order to adjust instruction. This year, we'll be able to take personalized learning

even further because each child in AIS will have his/her own Chromebook. More information about this will be provided on the first day back.

Last spring, a survey was sent to all parents so that we could get feedback on our school. We had a high percentage of parents who participated. Thank you so much! Your feedback is valued! It will help to determine what is working well and how we can continue to improve. Here are the *overall trends* in the feedback you provided.

What is working well at your child's school?

- The teachers. Feedback included positive statements about their ability to meet individual needs, their kindness, and their high expectations.
- Multi-age classrooms. Feedback included positive statements about the relationships students build by having their teacher and some classmates for two years, the leadership role 5th graders take, the buddy system between 4th and 5th graders, and the collaboration amongst multiple ages.
- Projects – project based learning. There were many positive comments about the Colonial Living Museum, Shark Tank, and Comic Con. There was a lot of positive feedback about students working in a team/collaboratively and about having multiple ways to show their learning.

What areas in the school could be improved?

- Student behavior was an area you noted. Feedback included bullying and monitoring of hallways and the playground.
- Specials classes (art, music, etc.) was an area you noted. Feedback included a preference for having a teacher-taught vs computer-taught World Language course, having *all* specials year round, and having smaller class sizes.

Our Response: Thank you so much for this input! It reflected areas we identified as those we wanted to improve in, and here are some of the changes we are making:

- The PBIS team and I met, and will meet again soon, to establish new routines that address behavior.
- We also formed a committee to look at our schedule. The frequency in which specials are taught within a 5 day period varies to accommodate the Department of Public Instruction recommended minutes, so some specials are taught 3 days out of 5 and some specials are taught 1 day out of 5. However, all specials will now be offered year round! By changing the schedule to reflect this, we were able to reduce the class sizes. Because specials teachers will have *all* students within a week, collaboration can more easily occur between specials and classroom teachers for integrated units and for projects. For those students with a love of these classes, they will be able to participate in them throughout the year. This will also help reduce “skill slip.”
- We have hired a Spanish teacher. Instead of a computer-based World Language course, students will have a teacher-taught Spanish class. This is also a benefit for our district because Altoona now offers Spanish K-12!

While the lunchroom was not an *overall* trend per your feedback, we changed the schedule so that all AIS students can eat together and then go out to recess together. This will allow students to more easily form and/or maintain friendships with students in other classrooms. Having more space in the school was also not an overall trend but was mentioned a couple of times. Now that we have a new elementary school and have remodeled our existing schools, this is no longer a problem. I cannot wait for the students and for you to see the school when you bring your son/daughter on Sept. 7th! We will also have an Open House this fall. More information will be coming about this.

All of AIS is excited to welcome our students back! It is going to be a wonderful year!

Sincerely,

Andrea Steffen
Principal