

***U.S. Department of Education***  
***2021 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program***

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[X] Public or [ ] Non-public

For Public Schools only: (Check all that apply) [ ] Title I [ ] Charter [ ] Magnet [ ] Choice

Name of Principal Mr. Daryl Topalian  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name Henry E. Huntington Middle School  
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 1700 Huntington Drive  
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City San Marino State CA Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 91108-2541

County Los Angeles County

Telephone (626) 299-7060 Fax (626) 299-7064

Web site/URL https://www.hehms.us/ E-mail dtopalian@smusd.us

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Principal's Signature)

Name of Superintendent\* Dr. Linda de la Torre E-mail lhtorre@smusd.us  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name San Marino Unified School District Tel. (626) 299-7000

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Superintendent's Signature)

Name of School Board President/Chairperson Mrs. Shelley Ryan  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(School Board President's/Chairperson's Signature)

The original signed cover sheet only should be converted to a PDF file and uploaded via the online portal.

*\*Non-public Schools: If the information requested is not applicable, leave blank.*

## **PART I – ELIGIBILITY CERTIFICATION**

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The electronic signature on the first page of this application (cover page) certify that each of the statements below, concerning the school’s eligibility and compliance with U.S. Department of Education and National Blue Ribbon Schools requirements, are true and correct.

1. All nominated public schools must meet the state’s performance targets in reading (or English language arts) and mathematics and other academic indicators (i.e., attendance rate and graduation rate), for the all students group, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
2. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 2021 in order to meet all eligibility requirements. Any status appeals must be resolved at least two weeks before the awards ceremony for the school to receive the award.
3. The school configuration must include one or more of grades K-12. Schools located on the same campus (physical location and mailing address) must apply as an entire school (i.e. K-8; 6-12; K-12 school). Two (or more) schools located on separate campuses, must apply individually even if they have the same principal. A single school located on multiple campuses with one principal must apply as an entire school.
4. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2015 and grades participating in statewide assessments must have been part of the school for at least the three years prior to September 2019.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 or 2020.
6. The nominated school has no history of testing irregularities, nor have charges of irregularities been brought against the school at the time of nomination. If irregularities are later discovered and proven by the state, the U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s application and/or rescind a school’s award.
7. The nominated school has not been identified by the state as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years.
8. The nominated school or district is not refusing Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district-wide compliance review.
9. The OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district concluding that the nominated school or the district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan from the district to remedy the violation.
10. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the nominated school or the school district, as a whole, has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution’s equal protection clause.
11. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school or school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.

## PART II - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

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Data should be provided for the current school year (2020-2021) unless otherwise stated.

**DISTRICT** (Question 1 is not applicable to non-public schools.)

1. Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
- 2 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
  - 1 Middle/Junior high schools
  - 1 High schools
  - 0 K-12 schools
- 4 TOTAL

**SCHOOL** (To be completed by all schools. Only include demographic data for the nominated school, not the district.)

2. Category that best describes the area where the school is located. If unsure, refer to NCES database for correct category: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/> (Find your school and check “Locale”)

- Urban (city or town)  
 Suburban  
 Rural

3. Number of students as of October 1, 2020 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent at the school. Include all students enrolled, in-person, participating in a hybrid model, or online only. If online schooling or other COVID-19 school issues make this difficult to obtain, provide the most accurate and up-to-date information available:

Grade	# of Males	# of Females	Grade Total
PreK	0	0	0
K	0	0	0
1	0	0	0
2	0	0	0
3	0	0	0
4	0	0	0
5	0	0	0
6	116	85	201
7	105	112	217
8	131	97	228
9	0	0	0
10	0	0	0
11	0	0	0
12 or higher	0	0	0
<b>Total Students</b>	352	294	646

\*Schools that house PreK programs should count preschool students **only** if the school administration is responsible for the program.

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school (if unknown, estimate):
- 0.1 % American Indian or Alaska Native
  - 63 % Asian
  - 1.5 % Black or African American
  - 5 % Hispanic or Latino
  - 0.2 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - 30 % White
  - 0.2 % Two or more races
  - 100 % Total**

(Only these seven standard categories should be used to report the racial/ethnic composition of your school. The Final Guidance on Maintaining, Collecting, and Reporting Racial and Ethnic Data to the U.S. Department of Education published in the October 19, 2007 *Federal Register* provides definitions for each of the seven categories.)

5. Student turnover, or mobility rate, during the 2019 - 2020 school year: 2%

If the mobility rate is above 15%, please explain:

This rate should be calculated using the grid below. The answer to (6) is the mobility rate.

<b>Steps For Determining Mobility Rate</b>	<b>Answer</b>
(1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	13
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	3
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	16
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2019	675
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.02
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	2

6. Specify each non-English language represented in the school (separate languages by commas):

Arabic, Armenian, Burmese, Cantonese, Dutch, French, German, Hebrew, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Spanish, Taiwanese, Thai, Vietnamese.

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 6 %

37 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 8 %

Total number students who qualify: 50

8. Students receiving special education services: 8 %

50 Total number of students served

Indicate below the number of students with disabilities according to conditions designated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Do not add additional conditions. All students receiving special education services should be reflected in the table below. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>11</u> Autism                 | <u>4</u> Multiple Disabilities                 |
| <u>0</u> Deafness                | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment                 |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness          | <u>12</u> Other Health Impaired                |
| <u>0</u> Developmental Delay     | <u>12</u> Specific Learning Disability         |
| <u>3</u> Emotional Disturbance   | <u>6</u> Speech or Language Impairment         |
| <u>1</u> Hearing Impairment      | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury                |
| <u>1</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>0</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 1

10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to the nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below. If your current staffing structure has shifted due to COVID-19 impacts and you are uncertain or unable to determine FTEs, provide an estimate.

	<b>Number of Staff</b>
Administrators	2
Classroom teachers, including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	31
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	5
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	3
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	2

11. Average student-classroom teacher ratio, that is, the number of students in the school divided by the FTE of classroom teachers, e.g., 22:1 21:1

12. Show daily student attendance rates. Only high schools need to supply yearly graduation rates.

Required Information	2019-2020	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016
Daily student attendance	97%	97%	97%	97%	97%
High school graduation rate	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

13. **For high schools only, that is, schools ending in grade 12 or higher.**

Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2020.

Post-Secondary Status	
Graduating class size	0
Enrolled in a 4-year college or university	0%
Enrolled in a community college	0%
Enrolled in career/technical training program	0%
Found employment	0%
Joined the military or other public service	0%
Other	0%

14. Indicate whether your school has previously received a National Blue Ribbon Schools award.

Yes  No

If yes, select the year in which your school received the award. 1996

15. In a couple of sentences, provide the school’s mission or vision statement.

Henry E. Huntington Middle School collaborates with parents, students, faculty and staff, and the greater San Marino community to foster an emotionally, intellectually, and ethically safe learning environment that challenges all students to continuously grow a deep and varied set of abilities as measured by research-based best practices, as well as federal, state, and local standards, assessments, and metrics.

16. Briefly describe how your school has been operating during the current 2020-2021 school year (e.g., open as usual, online only, a hybrid model, etc.)? If different grade levels in your building operate in different ways, include this. If the school began with one model and switched to another partially through the year, include this as well.

The school year started online only with a modified bell schedule (a slightly later start time, a shorter lunch period, and an amended Friday schedule—think minimum day). In late October, we offered a hybrid model, inviting cohorts of Special Academic Instruction (SAI) students or students with active Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) back. In late January, we resumed after-school sports groups on campus (basketball, volleyball, flag football). And on April 1, we “re-opened” campus with a hybrid model. Students are in one of three cohorts (A, B, or C) and spend two days a week on campus (A and B) or continue entirely online (C).

17. **For public schools only**, if the school is a magnet, charter, or choice school, explain how students are chosen to attend.

## **PART III - SUMMARY**

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The shortest-living species in the insect world is the Mayfly (*Dolania americana*) with an average lifespan of five minutes. In the animal kingdom, a humming bird beats its wings for approximately eight years before it does not. And if we ignore the longest living mammal (the Bowhead whale with an average lifespan of 200 years), the oldest living human is currently Kane Tanaka, who celebrated her 118th birthday in Fukuoka, Japan this year. As high as these numbers climb, there remains a limit to how long an organism can live. But what about an idea? Or a school?

Henry E. Huntington Middle school celebrated its centennial in 2018, and while Ms. Tanaka's age remains impressive (she entered the Guinness Book of World Records when she turned 116), she is only 15 years older than Huntington Middle School. Only. So what does this longevity suggest about Huntington?

Perhaps best known for the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino (population 13,000) is an otherwise invisible suburb in Los Angeles County (population 10.4 million) that a person might have difficulty locating without the assistance of Google maps. But despite its small size, the community stands extra-large on the academic landscape. Huntington Middle School enjoys a national reputation (it received a National Blue Ribbon designation in 1996) and has been recognized as a California Distinguished School in 1994, 2005, 2009, and 2013. Its students have earned numerous honors as athletes, artists, and scholars, and they consistently score in the top one percent of California middle schools in state assessments.

But these students are not just a test score the school harvests each year. In fact, the idea of "teaching to a test" is abhorrent to the teachers, who remain focused on a student's social-emotional as well as academic growth. True, teachers hold high expectations for their students, but by creating classroom environments that value learning over grades, teachers better appreciate students for who they are. With an average class size of 21, teachers know their students. And this familiarity encourages students to be their best selves. Inevitably, some teachers teach a student who is the child of a former student of theirs, and while there are no hard data on the multi-generations of families that attend the school, it's easy to see what draws people back to the community.

We have one of the finest middle school intramural and competitive sports programs (tennis, volleyball, basketball, wrestling, cross country, track, football) in Southern California, in which over half the students participate. While this year has seen a pause in athletics, we recently were able to invite students back on campus in small cohorts for volleyball, basketball, and football. Go Foxes!

Our Visual and Performing Arts program rivals (and has competed against) many high schools. Over 70-percent of students are involved in either orchestra, choir, wind ensemble, band, dance, speech and debate, or drama. One would have to look specifically at a performing arts high school to find a similar level of involvement.

Since Huntington received the National Blue Ribbon distinction in 1996, a seismic shift in education occurred with the arrival of Common Core. And with the revised state standards, came a shift in teachers' attitudes. The tired analogy of student as empty vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge disappeared. Such a passive idea—that teachers somehow filled their students with their infinite knowledge. (Did these same teachers wear tweed jackets and teach from brick buildings with ivy-covered walls?) Rather, today's teachers better understand how students best learn, and the four-C's (critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication) inform how instruction looks (and sounds) in the classroom.

Yet. Another powerful idea shared in the Huntington Middle School classroom. Have you considered the power of this word, yet? With Listening and Participation an important state standard, teachers have adopted acceptable and unacceptable responses during small or whole-group discussion. A student may never respond to a question, "I don't know." However, they may offer, "I don't know, yet." The power that one-syllable conveys is beyond. It offers hope. It reminds them to be patient with themselves. It reminds them that learning is an active, ongoing process that they control. Because they are not empty vessels.

The idea of a well-rounded student can get lost on a report card when academic achievement is reduced to a column of letter grades, but teachers do not just assess academic achievement. They also consider the whole child and their character development. A Good Citizenship program recognizes students beyond their academic achievements. Each month, teachers nominate their students in different categories: Respect, Trustworthiness, Caring, Perseverance, Fairness, and Integrity. And if smiles and joyful outbursts when the names are announced over the loudspeaker (or in a video the principal and vice principal record this year) are any metric, students view this as quite an honor. They want to be better citizens.

And finally, the school has implemented several programs that address student inclusivity, including: Where Everyone Belongs (welcomes students new to the school and the entire 6th grade class with ongoing informational meetings and fun activities), Safe School Ambassadors (provides a safe space for a broad range of students to meet in small, devoted groups to discuss issues ranging from school betterment to bullying), and a Rotary-Interact Service Club, (exposes students to the importance of volunteering). And a Gender Sexuality Alliance (allows LGBTQ+ or any student to know they are valued) is currently forming.

## **PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION**

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### **1. Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.**

“Although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience.”

--Carol Dweck, Mindset

One archetype of nightmare involves showing up to class unprepared for a test. The horror—you forgot to study! Another involves your entering a classroom and realizing you have no clothes on. The horror—you are naked! But in our present world, neither dream is that bad because at least you are at school. No teacher imagined trading their classroom experience for staring at a computer screen for seven hours a day. And while some students may have found taking online classes in the comfort of their home initially fun, the novelty has worn off.

Previously, our campus bell schedule was divided by seven: a zero period for several electives, followed by periods 1-6. The original shift to distance learning last spring turned to block scheduling. But over the summer with the certainty of distance learning continuing, parents and staff were surveyed about class schedules, and the original bell schedule returned, albeit with a slightly later start time and an amended Friday schedule (think minimum day). The rationale was to preserve a schedule that was familiar to both students and staff when almost everything else in the world seemed to be in a state of flux.

So what actually happens during these seven periods? The short answer is everything. Just at a slower pace. One cannot ignore the challenges of online classes: unreliable Wi-Fi, barking dogs in the background, eye-fatigue. The reality of distance learning in middle school is that teachers cannot cover the same amount of material as they would in a physical classroom. Checking for understanding, one of the most important daily tools of a teacher, becomes exponentially harder when they cannot see the whole child: a furrowed brow, the pencil put down on the desk, a subtle shift in body posture. All of these that inform a teacher and guide their instruction are lost online. And so, they move slower.

Softening the sudden shift to online classes, the majority of our curriculum already existed online. Math, English Language Arts (ELA), and English Language Development (ELD) use textbooks that have a digital subscription, too. Students may access the same material in textbook or online form—the latter benefitting students who may be in a shared work environment filled with distractions. Students have taken advantage of the audio features—having a text read to them to help block out distractions they would not encounter in a physical classroom.) In social sciences, students frequently access articles from Newsela, an online bank of newspapers. The Science Department has piloted several textbooks since California adopted Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS); however, teachers found the revised material either too-scripted, not giving students room to gather the empirical evidence that NGSS was promoting, or not fit for the digital age. Thus began the science department’s three-year quest to build their own curriculum that covers the state standards and digitizing it. Their curriculum now addresses NGSS standards and works well in-class and online.

“Take out a number two pencil.” Not a command you will hear from any teacher at Huntington Middle School. Because teachers abandoned the Scantron mentality with the advent of Common Core, formative and summative assessments look similar in distance learning to the classroom. Assessments are based on substantive questions that reflect Depth of Knowledge (DOK) levels 2-4 thinking. But just as the pace of instruction has slowed, assessments are less frequent this year and possibly contain fewer questions to allow for technical issues online. (Lagging internet makes timed tests less equitable for some students, so teachers take this into account as they revise the number of questions on their assessments.)

How is this assessment data used to analyze and improve student performance? Quarter and semester grades provide data for interventions. Any student who demonstrates “Standard Not Met” or “Standard Nearly Met” in an academic course may be invited to join an after-school support class. A student’s sample work and past California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) scores also provide data to

inform possible interventions. Additionally, teachers may request a System Support Team (SST) meeting for a student at any time during the academic year. Typically, these meetings occur when one or more teachers notices a lack of effort or drop in work quality from a student. Parents/Guardians are invited to join the SST meeting to offer their perspective and/or learn of the teachers' concerns. Frequently, these meetings result in additional "safety nets" for the student and their improvement follows.

Because we have devoted ELD courses, these students take the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) each year. This data is used to determine when to best mainstream the student out of ELD.

As Dweck concludes, "The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it's not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives." Certainly, the past year of distance learning has been challenging, but Huntington Middle School has endured in part by embracing this growth mindset.

**1a. For secondary schools (middle and/or high school grades):**

"Education is the passport to the future."

--Malcolm X

In 2020, the graduation rate at San Marino High School (the one high school in our district that our middle school promotes to) was 96.2 percent, and 98.6 percent of those students identified a college or university in which they intended to enroll. If there is an inference to be made from these high numbers, it is that students in this district value their education. As Benjamin Franklin noted, "An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest."

So how do middle school students engage in college and career readiness?

A Rotary-Interact Club on campus hosts a monthly speaker series at lunch, so students can hear a variety of community members discuss their education and career paths in a casual setting. This year's calendar of events went online.

In the Counseling Department, the school counselor offers Career Technical Education (CTE) through an annual College and Career Week. This year's event will also continue online. Students begin the week by completing a career interest survey. The questions are designed to help students explore possible careers based on their interests and provide information to start (or continue) thinking about their future. On other days, students take virtual field trips to various community colleges, 4-year colleges, and universities. These campuses are selected to represent the gamut of higher education experiences. Additionally, students have designated class periods to videoconference with guest speakers from the community, who discuss their own education and career paths. These speakers are not limited to established professionals; current college students and recent college graduates also share their experiences. And finally, the College and Career Week offers students the opportunity to sign up for virtual job shadowing. These experiences and the knowledge students gain will pay interest in their future.

**1b. For schools that offer preschool for three- and/or four-year old students:**

**2. Other Curriculum Areas:**

In a 2009 Edutopia article ("Why Arts Education Is Crucial, and Who's Doing It Best"), author Fran Smith notes, "Involvement in the arts is associated with gains in math, reading, cognitive ability, critical thinking, and verbal skill. Arts learning can also improve motivation, concentration, confidence, and teamwork." To these ideas, Huntington Middle School concurs. (Note: the following curriculum areas are open to all grades; classes meet every day, while the club meets weekly.)

In Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) this year, Choir curriculum has shifted its main focus as a performance ensemble to building individual musicianship skills. Online resources such as Sightreadingfactory and Musictheory help deliver personalized music literacy instruction. Students choose their own level of difficulty as they practice sight reading of rhythmic and melodic exercises. That said, the tradition of full-ensemble choir performances each quarter have continued by synching student audio/video recordings together to produce a virtual choir. Additionally, virtual Band and Orchestra performances have continued (using Adobe Premiere Pro) as well, allowing students to understand how their solitary efforts contribute to the ensemble. Bravo!

For the Speech and Debate Club, the pivot to online platforms was relatively easy. Perhaps it is the mostly solitary nature of individual events (I.E.), but students have continued running practice debate rounds and practicing their I.E.'s on the Schoology group page to receive peer and teacher reviews. The competitive tournament schedule (Huntington is a member of the Southern California Junior Forensics League) has also adopted well to an online format (the league uses 8x8 Meet that allows judges to fill out electronic ballots and provide feedback while watching the speaker all on one screen).

Physical education (P.E.) has taken an even more crucial role in students' physical and mental well-being this year, as medical reports repeatedly warn of the ill effects of too-much sitting and screen time. With team sports on hold, instructors placed a health-based lens on class, exploring concepts of physical fitness, health, and goal setting. Students receive a monthly exercise calendar and create activity logs to record their progress as they utilize cardio, strength and flexibility training mostly with their own body weight. And just because they can't engage in team sports, doesn't mean they can not analyze the rules of the game(s) through informative and interactive weekly presentations on various sports.

In Spanish (our world language elective for 7-8 grade), the curriculum shifted from textbooks with grammar drills and long vocabulary lists to Communicative Input (C.I.) two years ago, so the transition to online teaching no es muy dificil. C.I.'s emphasis on real communication means students hear Spanish (the teacher, plus audio/video clips—think watching a scene from a Spanish-language drama or listening to a track from Shakira and then having to analyze/discuss the work en espanol) every day in class; students also practice speaking Spanish todos los dias. And to allow for Wi-Fi issues, students may record and submit their oral responses digitally. Que bueno!

### **3. Academic Supports:**

“Change is the only constant in life.”

--Heraclitus (c. 500 BCE)

This ancient Greek philosopher viewed fire as both a creative and transformative element, not imagining SARS-CoV-2 could prove its equal. Certainly no one today would argue that the pandemic hasn't transformed the world (or specifically here, education). But nudged creativity? Absolutely. With the sudden shift to distance learning, teachers had to be creative to meet the diverse and individual needs of various student populations as they tailored instruction, interventions, and assessments.

In a stroke of good-timing, the district offered Universal Design for Learning (UDL) training last school year to all teachers. The benefit of UDL is that it provides educators with multiple means of engagement (the “why” of learning), representation (the “what” of learning), and actions and expressions (the “how” of learning). Reimagining lesson plans through the filter of UDL has proven invaluable as teachers settled into their online classrooms.

Additionally, teachers have adopted a more forgiving timeframe for completing assessments (formative and summative) this year. Listening and participation (those who talk the most, learn the

most) remain an emphasis in the online classroom. Teachers give latitude when students report having Wi-Fi issues since work-from-home parents and other siblings also distance-learning frequently compete for a finite supply of internet connection.

For students performing below grade level, academic support classes are offered after school. These classes are designed to give individual and small-group attention to students who are struggling academically in primarily math and English, but teachers are able to provide support in other subject areas (science and social science).

Honors sections of math and English are offered for students above grade level in grades 7-8.

The Special Academic Instruction (SAI) team shares digital files of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or 504s with general education teachers before the start of each academic year, so that teachers can differentiate instruction as needed based on student performance and need. Additionally, support staff (aides) join online classes and effectively assist/communicate with students using breakout rooms.

Two sections of English Language Development (ELD) provide real-time, home-language support in Mandarin, Chinese, and Spanish. This year, all reading and writing assignments are combined with images or videos related to a reading. These images enrich the text, allowing students to make connections and comments, and seem to lower students' affective filters as they read and comment online about the text and images.

One elective, ELD Academy offers direct ELD instruction with a homework-support component. Additionally, ELD students can access an after-school support class once a week that focuses on reading, writing, and practice and training tests for the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP).

Since students cannot “walk in” for counseling support, the Counseling Department provides a virtual counseling office, wherein students can book appointments before, during, and after school to address their needs: academic skills and guidance support; organizational, study, and test-taking skills; education in understanding self and others; mental wellness and coping strategies; peer and family relationships and effective social skills; communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and conflict resolution; and, career and college awareness, exploration, and transitional planning to high school. The Counseling Department also provides students an online Wellness Center with resources to help their overall mental health (a virtual calming room, self-guided mindfulness activities, crisis and information hotlines).

## **PART V – SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE**

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### **1. Engaging Students:**

The sudden transition to distance learning saw many teachers immediately compare their virtual classrooms to the opening credit sequence of “The Brady Bunch.” But this reference to the early-70s sitcom was met with ignorant stares from large—possibly all—segments of the student population. Apparently, this show has escaped their gaze (or binge). Why does this matter? Because it bellies a greater issue: How does a teacher engage their students when everyone is reduced to a grid-screen? After all, a teacher’s small, throw-away comment or pop-culture reference is one way they connect with students in an on-going way; it reminds students that their teachers are relevant; that they have interests that exist beyond the classroom. So if every student didn’t pick up this now seemingly obscure TV reference at the start of distance learning, what hope was there for future engagement? Plenty, it turns out.

Huntington Middle School teachers consider student engagement key in their teaching strategy. Case in point, many teachers select Standard 1 (“Engages all students in the learning process”) when selecting a Plan for Professional Growth during an evaluation year.

The Science Department began writing a new curriculum and digitizing it three years ago, so the remaining challenge this year was incorporating the hands-on activities through distance learning. This has been addressed by incorporating simulations and video recording all labs and teacher demonstrations. Additionally, teachers use Google Slide assignments that allow students to construct models and explain them. For the record, no student has reported missing the in-lab stench of formaldehyde.

English Language Arts/English Language Development continue to engage students by giving them a purpose for reading. Every unit in StudySync (our State-adopted textbook that provides students both digital and hard copies of text as well as audio recordings) poses an essential question to the reader. Students better understand the material and remain engaged in the assigned readings as they become “detectives” trying to solve the essential question. Additionally, students are trained to be active readers by annotating (or “talking to the text”) as they read and re-read the text.

The Math Department has also pivoted to distance learning by embracing technology. ConnectED, Khan Academy, and even YouTube videos help provide different approaches to math lessons; students love (not an overstatement) Kahoot with its game-like review questions; and teachers already familiar with the document camera have added Sphere2 to their computer dock (this free app projects the doc camera image into the Zoom/Meet shared screen), allowing teachers to demonstrate a math concept live with their own handwriting. Certainly, there is something supremely engaging—perhaps calming, even—about watching another human hand create (in this case, math problems) in real time. Evidence the popularity of painter Bob Ross and his long-running PBS series “The Joy of Painting.”

Social sciences have embraced the Socratic seminar as a way for students to thoughtfully discuss a transformative year (the pandemic, elections, social justice movements), while teachers serve the role of unbiased moderator. Additionally, students read articles from Newsela, which identifies a student’s Lexile level after several quizzes and then automatically assigns articles at their correct reading level, so students can access and comprehend the same information (albeit through different Lexile), keeping them better engaged. Also, students practice autonomy (another factor of engagement) by selecting their own articles in a given category to read.

### **2. Engaging Families and Community:**

Aside from the tentpole events of Back to School (held online this year) and Open House (to be determined by the school’s re-opening date), the principal hosts monthly online talks with parents and community members called “Fox Fuel.” (A fox serves as the school mascot.) These casual yet informative talks share good news (the Science Olympiad Team’s recent third place win in the Southern California Regional Tournament, for example), academic updates (the need for students to fill out a California health survey in

their P.E. classes), other campus news (the ongoing distribution of free Chromebooks and Wi-Fi hotspots to families), updates from our Covid Compliance Team (that follows guidelines set by the Los Angeles County Public Health Department), and an open forum Q-and-A session. Allowing parents and/or community members to raise questions and receive immediate answers is a key element to engaging parents and maintaining transparency.

Whereas these meetings were held in the school cafeteria in previous years, the online format this year hasn't dampened parent attendance. In fact, some parents report being better able to attend these meetings now and feel more connected with the school.

Regularly adding to the "Fox Fuel" agenda are the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) President and the school counselor.

The counselor routinely offers advice on social-emotional wellness (tips on yoga and meditation for teens, breathing and guided relaxation exercises, journaling exercises) and what parents should look for with their children as we recently crossed the one-year mark of this online educational journey.

Serving as another bridge between the school and families, the PTA President provides information about parent-led activities that support the school and offers opportunities for parents to volunteer on school-related projects. The PTA also runs its own separate meetings that discuss social and school fundraising opportunities. The president reports that a majority of Huntington teachers (the important "T" in PTA) are contributing members.

The San Marino Schools Foundation (SMSF) and PTA Affiliates serve an outside role in providing additional financial support to the school through contributions from the community. As generous as these donations are, they also highlight how the community values education and recognizes the value that Huntington teachers bring to the middle school classroom.

### **3. Creating Professional Culture:**

"Kneading to relax? How coronavirus prompted a surge in stress baking."

The Guardian, April 2020 headline.

Give a child a recipe for bread and the ingredients to make it, and they will likely create a mess in the kitchen with flour dusting their clothes and hair, hands sticky with glutinous bits, and the floor—don't even look there, but they will end up with a shaggy ball of dough. It might not rise properly, and the finished product out of the oven might not be anyone's idea of an Instagram post, but at least it is authentic. And one other thing is certain: Their next loaf will be better.

The switch to distance learning did not come with a recipe. Entering this kitchen, teachers experienced similar messes. Some did not know Meet could be a proper noun and thought Zoom was an onomatopoeia; others had classrooms already tricked-out with technology, so the digital classroom wasn't as challenging. But what has unified these teachers is their ability to collaborate. To share their best (and worst) practices has become a pillar of support.

The school's Professional Development (PD) approach has been largely teacher-driven this year.

Each week, half-hour windows before first period are reserved for either grade-level or department meetings. These times aren't mandatory events. No one likes the idea of having a meeting for the sake of having a meeting. Instead, they create an opportunity and foster a climate of collaboration: last-minute questions about a lesson or student; questions about technology; or perhaps just socializing—teachers are generally social, and the need for conversation didn't disappear with distance learning (in fact, it's an easy argument to make that this need increased).

Additionally, teachers have a larger block of time at the end of the week. With an abbreviated class schedule

on Fridays, teachers have the opportunity to further collaborate. Perhaps English teachers plan an upcoming poetry unit; or science and math teachers devise a cross-curricular project on the Perseverance rover landing on Mars. Either way, teachers feel valued because the school respects their time. And for those who prefer spreadsheets or asynchronous time, there's professional collaboration through a shared google doc, where teachers are able to report/update what works/doesn't work for them with distance learning. And like dough that proofs, this document has grown from a single entry to several pages of teachers adding their ideas.

There have also been several District-offered PDs focusing on Schoology (our newly adopted digital platform), restorative practices, implicit bias, and trauma-informed practices.

Still on the school calendar, department-chair and faculty meetings occur monthly. These meetings are an opportunity for administration to share school business and check in with staff. And because mental health care has become a more urgent matter these days, the school has partnered with Solace Care, a company that coordinates visits with health care providers. This service is offered to all staff and students.

#### **4. School Leadership:**

“A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.”

—Lao Tzu

The principal is not in charge of the middle school. That's right: Not. In. Charge. Heresy? Not really. He is the first—or perhaps only one—to admit this. Rather, he is responsible for those who are in charge: the teachers. But if you ask a teacher, they will tell you that students guide their curriculum. So who's really in charge?

The school's leadership structure ensures that policies, programs, relationships, and resources focus on student achievement. Foremost, the principal remains mindful that administrative decisions impact teachers and their classrooms—not the administration—and so he strives to advocate always for teachers and students.

The leadership team consists of a principal, vice principal, school counselor, and administrative assistant. Corporate board rooms might question the idea that an administrative assistant is counted among the leadership team, but this is a middle school, not a Fortune 500 company; and the reality is that she plays a role more vital than “assistant”—she is the liaison between leadership and anyone who enters the front office (students, staff, parents). If you have a question or need, she will answer it or fill it. If people were keys on a ring, she would be the master key.

Sempre avanti. Always forward. The school principal closes all email correspondence with this salutation, and this idea summarizes one aspect of his leadership philosophy and how we collectively make progress as a school. But how fast do we move forward? The principal remains mindful of how we advance this year and admits that the pace is a little slower. Classroom visits remain central in how he takes the academic pulse of the school. Armed with a list of Meet and Zoom codes, he is able to visit virtual classrooms on a regular basis.

A key role the vice principal plays this year is videoconferencing czar. This is not an official title, but perhaps it should be. When teachers complain about students in class with chronic muted videos, they email the vice principal. He reaches out to students and their parents/guardians to understand the cause of this. Sometimes it is a case of slow internet speeds (an easy fix since the District offers free Wi-Fi routers to all families). Sometimes, it is a student's desire to not show their face (a less easy fix, since online privacy issues and a student's social-emotional needs arise). But the vice principal's efforts consistently increase student engagement and decrease teacher frustration.

The counseling department continues to work closely with teachers who request Student Success Team (SST) meetings. Additionally, the counselor focuses on mental wellness so an online Wellness Center

containing resources and wellness activities was created for students to access anytime.

The Fox Guide, a digital and printed resource, outlines policies and practices in place so students are clear about what is expected of them. Students function online under the same code of civility that the Guide details: being truthful and kind and taking responsibility for their own actions rather than blaming others and cooperating with one another.

Finally, administration would like to be clear about the honor of being nominated as a National Blue Ribbon school. This nomination reflects the culture of teaching. Notes the principal, “It’s the teachers (and longevity of staff) that make this a National Blue Ribbon school.”

## **5. Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning:**

“You’re muted.” Not a phrase any teacher will miss repeating over the video-conferenced days of distance learning. But it does serve a powerful reminder beyond the obvious message to unmute before speaking. Every student should have a voice at school and deserves to be heard. No one should be muted.

So how does Huntington address the diverse needs and backgrounds of students and staff? By giving them a voice.

Science teachers recently tied a lesson about moon phases and lunar cycles to the Lunar New Year, which is culturally significant for our large Asian student population. This lesson also helped students of other races, ethnicities, and cultures learn about an important holiday for those in their community. These same teachers also expanded a review on natural resources into a discussion about equity and fairness. Students studied how natural resources (coal, oil, minerals, water) are not evenly distributed around the world and saw how food and wealth are disproportionately distributed.

In English Language Arts/English Language Development, the StudySync anthology includes a range of author’s voices, notably women and people of color. Essential questions also center on equity and cultural awareness. One unit (“A Moral Compass”) examines the diversity of human experiences as it answers the question: How is character formed? Another unit (“The Powers that Be”) considers the principles of a just society through a series of fiction and nonfiction narratives of people striving to create a fair society.

Any major election year provides an opportunity for social science teachers to facilitate discussions about civics. The past year proved no exception as these classes have embraced discussions about elections, activism, and social justice in broad and unbiased manners, allowing all students’ ideas and opinions to be heard.

The Associated Student Body (ASB) sponsors special days that balance amusement (hat day) with the more cerebral (interactive presentations on a diverse range of historical figures—from abolitionist Harriet Tubman to our nation’s youngest inaugural poet Amanda Gorman—for Black history month). Wearing a cap with a favorite logo or any headwear that carries cultural significance might be seen as just “fun,” but really, it allows students a chance to express their opinions or culture through outward appearances (addressing the desire to be seen, literally); the more substantive, student-directed ASB conversations about race in America (Black History Month) or women’s past and current contributions to world events (Women’s History Month) address the desire to be heard.

The school counselor helps foster equity, cultural awareness, and respect by being an active

listener and creating a caring and supportive environment (using restorative approaches and practices, using trauma-informed interventions, opening dialogues on family and cultural norms, and encouraging students to use “I” statements). Additionally, the counselor implemented an inclusive program (Where Everybody Belongs) several years ago, and despite distance learning, has managed to continue its use this year with Friday-scheduled meetings (versus the original homeroom visits). During these meetings, eighth grade WEB leaders meet with sixth graders and new students to mentor and guide them as they find their voices in this new environment of middle school. Because no one should be muted.

## **PART VI - STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

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“[P]eople forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

--Maya Angelou

Middle school poses a unique challenge for students: They're caught between the cut-and-paste joys of elementary school and the more rigorous standards of high school where everything they do "counts." That said, middle school is where students find their academic footing and have the grace to fail. As the Japanese proverb says: Fall down seven times, stand up eight. But middle school is also where the volume on their social-emotional lives turns up loud. Friendships change. Their bodies change (except when they don't—because that's how puberty works). They have crushes, and these crushes are crushed. (Hence the name.) Their social cognition grows exponentially.

The one practice that has been the most instrumental to the school's continued ability to successfully educate and support students since school closure last March is socio-emotional.

It is the Friday schedule.

The Friday schedule has 17-minute class periods with a 3-minute "passing" period. There is an abbreviated snack break (that being a relative term since many students also snack during classes before lunch now—you have to pick your battles; why fight them on that breach of classroom etiquette when they're in their own private space, as long as they're discrete about it?) and no lunch break since the instructional day ends at 11:27. So what routinely happens during these abbreviated periods?

A misconception about the popular '90s sitcom "Seinfeld" was that it was a show about nothing. But this was never true. It followed the same formula of A and B plot lines of other half-hour, network sitcoms. It was always about something. But perhaps it was the way the show made us feel that made us think it was about nothing. The Friday schedule, with its limited class time, might also seem to be about nothing. But it definitely is about something.

Effective teachers understand the importance of building a relationship with their students. Without one, learning or the desire to learn is compromised. As Theodore Roosevelt mused, "Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care." But with classes online, teachers have lost the unofficial minutes before and after class or during break they used to spend with students talking about, well, anything non-academic: a sports team, a pet, a meme gone viral. Enter the Friday schedule. Officially, it is still class time, but since our school already exceeds the instructional minutes prescribed by the state, unofficially, it's not class time. Unofficially, it is a chance for teachers to get to know their students better; to show "how much [they] care."

How to explain the energy of a classroom? The soundtrack of students talking, laughing, even their quiet moments thinking create a certain charge. But online everyone is reduced to a default silence, and the sense of being together in the same space, figuring something out, disappears. Enter the Friday schedule. Teachers have the time to tap into that energy by asking questions about weekend plans (usually nothing given the general call to stay-at-home, but sometimes exciting—getting a puppy!) or how a student will celebrate their socially-distanced birthday (no more candles on the cake to blow out, but strong opinions still exist about the best type of cake). The Friday schedule gives students a sense of belonging in the virtual classroom and being asked personal questions helps build their esteem—Belonging and Esteem being two of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Ultimately, we want students to feel like they have a space at Huntington—that they belong. We want them to feel successful (but not in the everyone-gets-a-trophy way), valued (for their authentic selves and not just the receiver of some final letter grade), and respected. Enter the Friday schedule in the year of distance

learning. Because how a student feels about their middle school experience matters, and it may well be the only thing they will remember.