

**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 [X] Magnet [ ] Choice

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

Official School Name Thames River Magnet School  
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 250 Brandegee Avenue  
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Groton State CT Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 06340-3444

County New London County

Telephone (860) 980-8230 Fax \_\_\_\_\_

Web site/URL https://www.grotonschools.org/thamesriver E-mail jgiordano@groton.k12.ct.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.

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

Name of Superintendent\* Susan Austin E-mail saustin@groton.k12.ct.us  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Groton School District Tel. (860) 572-2100

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.

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

Name of School Board  
President/Chairperson Kim Shepardson Watson  
(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.

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

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):
- 6 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
  - 1 Middle/Junior high schools
  - 1 High schools
  - 0 K-12 schools
- 8 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                  | 38         | 28           | 66          |
| K                     | 35         | 21           | 56          |
| 1                     | 31         | 32           | 63          |
| 2                     | 24         | 23           | 47          |
| 3                     | 32         | 22           | 54          |
| 4                     | 15         | 20           | 35          |
| 5                     | 14         | 19           | 33          |
| 6                     | 0          | 0            | 0           |
| 7                     | 0          | 0            | 0           |
| 8                     | 0          | 0            | 0           |
| 9                     | 0          | 0            | 0           |
| 10                    | 0          | 0            | 0           |
| 11                    | 0          | 0            | 0           |
| 12 or higher          | 0          | 0            | 0           |
| <b>Total Students</b> | 189        | 165          | 354         |

\*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):
- 1 % American Indian or Alaska Native
  - 10 % Asian
  - 9 % Black or African American
  - 25 % Hispanic or Latino
  - 1 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - 47 % White
  - 7 % 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: 38%

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

Mary Morrisson Elementary School is located near the United States Submarine Base in Groton, CT. Fifty percent of our students are military dependent. Because of changing military assignments, the children of our active duty families move with regularity from one school to another, which may be from state to state or country to country due to military assignment and relocation. However, this mobility is seen not only in our military students who experience frequent transitions and extended deployments, but also in students whose family might be experiencing family disruption or economic stress.

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   | 69            |
| (2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year | 71            |
| (3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]  | 140           |
| (4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2019   | 364           |
| (5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)   | 0.38          |
| (6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100  | 38            |

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

Spanish, Arabic, Teluga, Mandarin

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 4 %  
14 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 52 %

Total number students who qualify: 183

8. Students receiving special education services: 26 %  
93 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>7</u> Autism                  | <u>2</u> Multiple Disabilities                 |
| <u>0</u> Deafness                | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment                 |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness          | <u>5</u> Other Health Impaired                 |
| <u>44</u> Developmental Delay    | <u>23</u> Specific Learning Disability         |
| <u>1</u> Emotional Disturbance   | <u>10</u> Speech or Language Impairment        |
| <u>0</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: 4
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.  | 21                     |
| Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.  | 13                     |
| Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.   | 23                     |
| Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc. | 1                      |

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 17:1

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

| <b>Required Information</b> | 2019-2020 | 2018-2019 | 2017-2018 | 2016-2017 | 2015-2016 |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Daily student attendance    | 95%       | 94%       | 95%       | 96%       | 95%       |
| 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.

| <b>Post-Secondary Status</b>                  |    |
|---|----|
| 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.

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

We are dedicated to providing a nurturing and challenging school environment so that each child makes a meaningful future as a global citizen.

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.

During the 20 - 21 school year Mary Morrisson Elementary School has operated with both hybrid (cohorts A&B) and full distance learning models. Parents were able to choose what worked best for their families. Both models offered a blend of asynchronous (at any time) and synchronous (at a specific time) learning. By using live video conferencing on Zoom, along with pre-recorded lessons and assignments posted on Learning Management Systems, students were offered a balanced approach and more opportunity. In March of 2021, we switched to either full distance or a full in-person model. At the time of this writing 86% of students had returned to full in-person.

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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Located near the United States Submarine Base in Groton, CT, Thames River Magnet School (known as Mary Morrisson Elementary School at time of NBRIS nomination, and referred to that way throughout the application) serves approximately 375 students, 50% of whom are military dependent students. Our school's former namesake, Mary Foulke Morrisson, was among the most active supporters of women's suffrage. After the woman suffrage bill became law, she devoted her time to educating women about their new rights. Celebrating her birthday is always an event at our school – but it was especially exciting when it coincided with 100 Years of Votes for Women!

We serve a highly mobile population. This mobility is seen not only in our military students who experience frequent transitions and extended deployments, but also in students whose family might be experiencing family disruption or economic stress. But regardless of the reason behind students' transition, we are proud of the supportive environment we have created and the school-based approaches we have designed to promote belonging and connectedness. So, over time, the entire staff has developed and fine-tuned a multi-layered transition plan to acclimate students and their families to their new school community.

School improvement is the work of the entire Mary Morrisson staff. Our collective efforts center on the critical, ongoing work that Data Teams and Intervention Teams play in improving student achievement. Our core strategy is our belief in the Growth Model. Rather than just looking at who is on level and who is not, we meet our students where they are and help them reach their greatest level of achievement through progress monitoring and targeted and systematic instruction. In order to do this, we mirror our work on Connecticut's Growth model and look at all growth achieved by all students. We work as a team to provide the necessary support and scaffolding to make sure all students learn. You could look in any classroom and truly not know which students have IEPs or which students receive reading or math support. We have blended the Tiers so that all students, regardless of ability, are supported.

As a school improvement team we reimagined a structure so that more of our students could thrive and engage starting with a school-wide schedule that embedded special educators, math and reading specialists into instructional blocks during Tier I and Tier II instruction. By tapping into the power of collaboration at weekly Data Team meetings, we maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction. The emphasis on collegial support has allowed teachers to share best practices, look at students' work, and plan curriculum and lessons together and get weekly support from administration and the literacy or math coach. These strategies were leveraged by the school-wide schedule which supported the kind of teaching and learning prioritized in our school.

Teaming with our Military School Liaison Officer, we built our Anchored4Life program which offers transition and resiliency training. This program, led by student Team Leaders and Crewmembers, has made a significant difference in both our military and civilian children's lives by providing support for those students that are having difficulties with deployment, transition, or entering the school as a new student. Our Anchored4Life team teaches, supports and welcomes all.

Proud to be a PBIS school (Positive Behaviors Interventions and Supports), we are committed to creating a school-wide environment that focuses on building positive relationships within the Mary Morrisson community. We have worked hard to establish the behavioral supports needed for all of our students to achieve both social and academic success. Within the last few years the faculty and staff have expanded our focus on building emotional awareness by using the Zones of Regulation Curriculum or the Mood Meter.

When COVID-19 presented us with a student engagement challenge we doubled down and recreated the connections that kids were missing. We had to ask the question, "What is not working for students?" and found new ways that worked for them and their families. Ensuring growth during the pandemic has required us to think differently. We began with a parent focus group that met bi-weekly and together, made sure our students felt safe, wanted, and welcome.

Another great program that we developed in response to the pandemic was the Mary Morrisson Outdoor

Challenge. Mary Morrisson teachers decided to prioritize balancing nature time with screen time. We found ways to bring our students outdoors and to engage them in the world around us: students have been taking nature walks in PE, going outside to play math games, and completing writing assignments about things in nature. Many assignments ask them to step away from the computer and go outside! We included families in this important initiative as well by sharing family resources and doing our daily morning news on location. And to make sure all students could equitably access the outdoors, we found community donors making sure students had the outdoor gear they needed. A Norwegian Proverb, “There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing,” became our motto.



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

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

The mission of Groton Public Schools is teaching and learning. It's that simple. That direct and focused approach is reflected in our core curriculum, instruction, and assessment and is driven by the Connecticut Core Standards, which provide teachers, students, and families with clear expectations of what a student should know and be able to do at each grade level. The standards focus on English Language Arts, Mathematics, as well as literacy in History/Social Studies, and Science. At Mary Morrisson our ELA Curriculum uses comprehensive reading and writing core programs that contain embedded assessments as well as differentiation materials. We have implemented a Readers' & Writers' Workshop Model with the goal of independence, engagement, and stamina. In grades K – 5 we use the Units of Study developed by Columbia University's Reading and Writing Project to provide students a balanced literacy program of shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, writing about reading, phonics, and word study. It is here that much of our Social Studies curriculum is embedded. The Units of Study include social studies topics, allowing for cross-curricular engagement. Using Teacher's College materials allows students to focus on primary sources and other narratives that explore the social studies curriculum topics and essential questions designed by our teachers.

Mary Morrisson School has adopted the use of Contexts for Learning Mathematics (CFLM) program into our math workshop as a means to bring the Standards for Mathematical Practice to life using real-world contextual problems. In addition to using CFLM we also use the Investigations math program, to support our curriculum, instruction and assessment. Our math workshop model offers our students inquiry-based learning opportunities incorporating mathematical models as thinking tools, rigorous problem solving, and the reading and writing of mathematical arguments and justifications to ensure the development of a positive growth-mindset. During math workshop, students work in small cooperative groups full of rich dialogue to problem solve, create gallery walks of their solutions and provide an explanation of their mathematical understanding. Our students enjoy the units as they are accessible for all learners and the contexts use students' lives and experiences to make the learning engaging and meaningful.

Our Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) curriculum uses hands-on activities to empower students at all grade levels to think, read, write, and argue like real scientists. NGSS performance expectations are the basis of our units, designed by our teachers, and are built around “bundles” of science standards. We use the performance expectations as an outline of the science skills and knowledge students should be able to demonstrate at each grade level.

Since the district first moved to distance learning, Mary Morrisson School has adapted its curriculum, instruction, and assessments around a hybrid teaching model. Using Zoom, SeeSaw, and Google Classroom, we have tried to keep schedules as consistent as possible to mirror a typical classroom day in a normal year. All grade levels make math, reading and writing workshop come to life virtually and at various tiers. Tier 1 mini-lessons happened through a “whole class” Zoom lesson, and then Zoom breakout rooms are used to execute Tier 2 instruction as teachers and specialists pull small groups as well as 1:1 conferences. Students are getting targeted and individualized instruction even over a virtual platform. Assessments drive our instruction so as a school we work hard to make sure that we are equipped to execute them effectively and intentionally - even over a screen! We developed digital resources that allowed us to deliver math assessments, the F&P Benchmark Assessment, grade level sight words, and the CORE phonics assessments over a virtual platform.

Even in a hybrid model we have kept “Bridging the Tiers” our focus through communication and collaboration. We believe that, the stronger Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction is, the fewer students require Tier 3 interventions. Math, reading, and writing mini lessons are delivered and students strengthen their understanding of the lesson through supporting turn and talks, even in a breakout room on Zoom.

Across all tiers we focus on growth. Whether virtual or in-person, regular progress monitoring between formative assessments ensures that our students are making growth. The formative assessments allow for specialists and teachers to work together to plan targeted and systematic groups based on the data.

In addition, we use Connecticut's Smarter Balanced ELA and Mathematics Interim Assessments that provide teachers with an additional tool that measures students' mastery of specific content and skills aligned to the Connecticut Core Standards for ELA, Mathematics and the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). Our instructional scope and sequence is aligned with each assessment we administer. We use assessment data to analyze and improve student and school performance throughout the year by measuring student progress and identifying areas of strength and weakness. The most critical component of effective assessment is when our teachers meet in weekly Data Teams to analyze student data, to reflect on student progress, and to improve instructional effectiveness, as well as meet the ever-changing needs of our students.

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

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

Our Integrated Preschool Special Needs Program with Peer Role Models uses Connecticut's Early Learning and Development Standards (CT ELDS). Our curriculum ensures that all students have high-quality learning experiences and includes cognition, social and emotional development, physical development and health, early language communication and literacy, creative arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

Due to COVID-19 we have increased the amount of individualized play while creating ways for all students to still be able to play together. Hybrid and distance learners accessed learning opportunities via SeeSaw and Zoom and hands-on, at-home tool kits were made available to students. Accommodations and modifications were made on a student-by-student basis in alignment with their IEPs and through Tier 1 instruction. We have increased the amount of communication with parents to see what supports they need, what surprised them, what was hard, and to collect important data using Connecticut's Documentation and Observation for Teaching System (CT DOTS).

Our program is based on evidence and data and we have created preschool classrooms that support and align with K - 3 academic standards. Our well-trained teachers assess and foster our students' learning and development. Built in collaboration with kindergarten teachers supports the critical transition from preschool to elementary school. But, more importantly, encouraging a high level of parental engagement is our best predictor of success in the primary grades.

We try to capture all the ingredients that contribute to social and cognitive development, providing our preschoolers with an equal opportunity to achieve school readiness. We teach children to be independent and risk takers. In our preschool classrooms, students learn basic conversations, turn-taking, and beginning problem solving skills. We encourage students to look for learning all around them, and to ask questions and be inquisitive learners. Especially this year, preparing our students for a lifelong journey of learning is the primary goal of the Mary Morrisson Integrated Preschool Program.

**2. Other Curriculum Areas:**

Taught by experienced teachers who are specialists in their fields, Music, Art, Physical Education, and Library/Media are critical parts of our K – 5 curriculum. In our Preschool classrooms these subjects are embedded into play and daily routines. These learning experiences support social development, language development, and physical-motor development for all children in our integrated preschool classrooms with many access points to meet students where they are.

The music curriculum consists of two strands. The general music curriculum, provided to all students in grades K – 5, develops music literacy by incorporating singing and playing music and learning about the role of music in our lives. These classes meet weekly. The second strand of the music curriculum includes both chorus and instrumental music in grades 4 and 5. Students meet once a week for a 30-40 minute small group lesson and an additional 45 minute full band or orchestra ensemble.

The art curriculum for students in grades K – 5 develops foundational understanding and skills in the visual arts. Students practice artistic activities that develop creative strategies and skills. Students attend art class each week. Exhibitions are mounted in hallways and we celebrate an Arts' Night each year that brings together Visual Arts, Music and Physical Education.

Grades K-5 participate in Health and Physical Education classes every week. Not only promoting skill development and proficiency, these classes enhance our students' overall health. Our physical education curriculum reflects the skills that can lead to physical activity for a lifetime and our classroom activities make the connection between classroom learning and a healthy lifestyle.

All K-5 students participate in Library/Media classes weekly and have access to technology both in school and at home. Through Library/Media instruction, students are encouraged not only to embrace reading, but to also be active participants in their learning through inquiry-based activities aligned with media and technology. Our library/media center, considered the “hub” of our school, is a fun and flexible space staffed with a school librarian who inspires students to become tech savvy and independent life-long readers and learners. Every day at Mary Morrisson we start with the Mary Morrisson News broadcast. All classrooms tune in each day to watch the MM News – anchored and produced by our grade 5 students. Hearing the same daily message is a great way to build a shared school-wide culture.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of a hybrid model, the operating schedule to these educational experiences has shifted to include alternating in-person and online lessons for distance learners. Our instrumental and chorus programs were limited by safe spacing guidelines so no large ensembles were held. But lessons for all students, whether in-person or distant, cover the same topics so students are able to learn together and communicate both in person or online. Team building activities that all students are able to engage were designed by our special area teachers, who realized we don't have to “do it the way we've always done it” and found ways to break with tradition in order to make sure students had multiple ways to feel connected to the school community.

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

Two of the best things about Mary Morrisson is our diverse student population and our collective work determining best practices for closing the achievement gaps often seen based on high mobility, ethnicity, socio-economics, language, or disability. Our focus on the growth model and our schoolwide plan to “Bridge the Tiers” in both math and ELA allows us to use the “push-in” model as a way to make Tier 1 accessible to all learners, regardless of ability including students performing both below and above grade level, our special education students with disabilities, and our highly-mobile military population.

So that all students could thrive and engage, our school improvement team created a structure starting with a school-wide schedule that embedded special educators, math specialists, and reading specialists into instructional blocks during Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction. In addition to our tiered interventions, other academic supports prioritized by our teachers include high expectations for all students, establishing caring relationships as a foundation for all learning communities, and - the keystone - effective parent involvement.

Our most effective strategy for academic support is embedding Tier 2 evidence-based interventions into Tier 1 by having specialists work alongside classroom teachers in the classroom. Classroom teachers, special educators, and specialists work as a team to make sure that we are closing the achievement gap and moving all students forward. This system is especially effective for our highly mobile military population, who might move in at any time during the school year. Our Tier 2 interventions, in the classroom, allows for immediate support for our students who might have just joined the class. From day one there is a specialist working with the classroom teacher to plan and then provide tier 2 evidence-based interventions. We try to make Tier 2 immediately

accessible to prevent students from needing Tier 3 interventions. By having the specialists in the classroom we bridge the gap between Tier 1, 2, and 3.

As a result of the academic supports we have put in place, Mary Morrisson School is proud to have been named a Connecticut School of Distinction for the last two consecutive years. We qualify as a School of Distinction for closing the achievement gap and demonstrating high academic growth for our high needs students in ELA (year 1) and Mathematics (year 2). Individual, targeted academic growth over time is a cornerstone of Mary Morrisson's School Improvement Plan as well as Connecticut's Next Generation Accountability System. Both analyze improvement in academic achievement and allow us to quantify the amount of growth achieved by the same students from one grade to the next grade.

We believe looking at student growth is the best measure of curriculum and instructional effectiveness. Weekly grade level data team meetings make this analysis possible. This is where the real work of tailoring instruction, interventions, and assessments that meets the diverse needs of our students happens. It's a team effort, and when teachers work together we become accountable not only to our students but to each other as well.

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

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

Mary Morrisson prides itself on creating a welcoming environment that is an exciting place for all to learn. Although the pandemic altered the traditional in-person learning, students are continuing to receive individualized support to meet their academic needs. One strategy that kept students engaged and connected was planning small groups whenever possible. Individualized lessons using digital learning platforms such as SeeSaw and Google Classroom targeted student needs through small group instruction via breakout rooms on Zoom. This not only allowed for students' voices to be heard, it also met them where they were currently performing which helped them build confidence.

One of the adaptations, as a result of hybrid learning, was student "office hours" with the teacher. Classroom teachers, in collaboration with reading/math specialists, scheduled one on one or small group times to support students who expressed difficulty with a particular lesson or required an additional review. This time allowed students to be successful in demonstrating their understanding.

To enhance student learning at home and to ensure students were engaged during distance lessons, teachers created toolkits with hands on materials were made available for parents to pick up. Classroom bins filled with labeled packets were outside the front doors for parents to retrieve as needed.

To continuously engage students with a schedule similar to the traditional school day, special areas teachers were attached to the homeroom teacher's online classroom. This afforded students and families access to specials in one centralized location, eliminating the need to search multiple teachers' classes to access lessons.

Supporting students' social and emotional learning was a top priority at Mary Morrisson. Since our distance learners had limited social connections due to COVID-19, our special areas teachers (art, music, gym, library/media) scheduled a weekly grade level "lunch bunch" via zoom. This fun but focused discussion/chat time allowed students to talk with all their grade level peers, not just their "cohort." To keep the lunch bunch engaging, activities varied, sometimes asking questions or sharing something with the group. The lunch bunch supported our students' overall social emotional learning and gave them a fun way to interact and make connections with friends – old and new.

Prior to COVID-19 our Student of the Month program has been a key strategy for student engagement and, fortunately, we were able to continue to recognize the great work of students throughout our school community. Although COVID-19 prevented gathering for school wide assemblies, families and students received a link to view the announcement and partake in the celebration.

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

Ongoing and consistent communication has been pivotal in enhancing our parent partnerships. We take a multi-layered approach sharing information over multiple platforms and various mediums to ensure families are connected. Teachers provide the first and most important connection, relying on in-person meetings at school pick-up, or daily messaging on Class Dojo or Remind 101 which offers photos and videos from the school day. In addition, whole school messages go out regularly using School Messenger, email blasts, social media posts, the school newsletter, and website.

When the school and family partnership is strengthened, students have a greater chance of school success. So when we found ourselves dealing with COVID-19, the Mary Morrisson faculty and staff collaborated with parents to discuss the planning phases of safely bringing our students back to hybrid in-person learning. It was important to take into consideration the parents' concerns and suggestions. We began with a parent focus group and created parent surveys. We met weekly to revisit the plans and make revisions to ensure the communication was ready to be published to the entire school community, in concise, parent-friendly language. Families of our potentially disconnected students received personal phone calls from classroom

teachers and administration to make connections and determine if there were any unexpressed needs. These personal connections allowed the school and families to build a common expectation that continued learning expectations are important to student achievement.

Mystic Aquarium in Connecticut became a community based partner that provided virtual field trips. One interactive experience focused on Beluga Whales. Students were thrilled to have the whales right in their classroom or at home! The kids received a live, front row view and were able to learn all about their life cycle, adaptations and special characteristics. Students were able to ask questions and get immediate responses from the tour guide. During another visit students experienced more of the aquarium - including the dinosaur exhibit which isn't visited during in-person field trips due to time constraints. It was a highly engaging experience and a great way to get students enthusiastic about science.

Pivotal in providing guidance relating to the pandemic, our newly formed partnership with Ledge Light Health District has been beneficial in helping families with COVID-19. When a positive case presented itself in the school, having a point of contact to assist in handling the quarantine process was extremely helpful. This partnership allowed us to communicate up to date information using medical data to inform families and guide our decision making.

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

Multi-tiered professional development starts at the district level. Teachers receive training to support the curricular initiatives that benefit the work of all schools in Groton. The next tier is building-based collaboration. We believe our most valuable resource is our teachers working together to plan and collaborate on the best instructional practices to meet the needs of our students.

Mary Morrisson has a team approach with teachers and administrators working collaboratively to achieve a supportive environment which ultimately leads to student success. We attribute our success to thoughtful community building centered around accountability and daily collaboration. As the pandemic progressed and hybrid and distance learning evolved, we dedicated weekly grade level team meetings to discuss and prepare for the delivery of instruction via remote learning platforms. These meetings were pivotal in making the transition because, as a team, we were able to coordinate with our instructional technology specialist to provide teachers with training and support as they created their Google/Seesaw classrooms.

Weekly grade level data team meetings allow for ongoing professional development supporting the academic needs of our students. Grade level teachers, along with math and literacy specialists, collaborate with administration each week to examine learning expectations, focus on the big ideas, and prioritize standards in the curriculum. We utilized this time to engage in meaningful conversation about effective teaching techniques and looked at student work to provide the best instruction.

During hybrid learning or distance learning we adopted the district's "Slow and Grow" model of thinking. The expectation for teachers was not perfection, but rather to improve and grow daily. We implemented a phased-in approach starting with supplemental learning, using prepared materials to address academic standards. As we transitioned to the hybrid model and distance learning, we designed both synchronous and asynchronous lessons that worked for students at home or in the physical classroom.

On-going professional development allowed us to find new approaches that would maximize the benefits of both face-to-face and virtual environments. For example, our continued professional learning from Columbia University's Reading and Writing Project has allowed us to adapt lessons to enhance engagement at home or in person. Including all specialists and paraprofessionals in every classroom allowed students to benefit from targeted lessons in both math and reading. Classroom teachers have consistent support that offers an avenue to engage remote and in-class learners. As a community, we have a unified vision of closing academic achievement gaps and we work together as a team to address challenges through collaboration.

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

The leadership philosophy at Mary Morrisson School can best be described as multi-tiered and collaborative. Our entire school community has a deep commitment to quality education and is defined by a culture of collaboration that values the contributions of all school staff who are actively engaged in the decision making process.

It is the mission of Mary Morrisson Elementary School to provide its students with opportunities designed to develop their talents and abilities. To reach this goal, we have a dynamic School Improvement Plan and a representative School Improvement Team, but the cornerstone of our success is built on the talents of teacher leaders who assume a variety of roles that shape the culture of our school, improve student learning, and influence our instructional practice.

The school's leadership structure begins with administration but branches off to the three teams described below. Teams of teachers look at different types of data across a layered system of support that promotes growth in all areas of development: academic, social, and emotional. It is critical that these teams' meetings occur regularly and are driven by data.

**Grade Level Intervention Teams:** Administrators, classroom teachers, specialists, and special educators meet weekly to discuss an individual student's strength and areas of weaknesses and make intervention decisions. Progress is monitored regularly and, if growth is not happening, we readjust and re-plan.

**Grade Level Data Teams:** Weekly Data Team meetings focus specifically on math and ELA to interpret and disaggregate grade level data and to guide instructional decision making. The team prioritizes the skills that all grade level teachers will target.

**Department Meetings:** These teams empower vertical staff collaboration. A representative from each grade level and specialists choose a department to support school improvement initiatives in the areas of math, reading, writing, and school climate. This essential collaboration ensures teacher voice is implemented in school-wide efforts and encourages staff to be a part of solutions.

This leadership structure allowed us to be ready to provide input on building-based changes that best support hybrid and distance learning, ensuring the needs of every student are met. As an example, we have adjusted and reallocated our human resources by including every paraprofessional in reading and math workshop training. This adjustment was an essential collaborative effort to support the many children who were at risk of being left behind. Because our culture of collaboration was already firmly in place for several years, we were in a position to overcome many of the challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

Mary Morrisson School is committed to cultivating an environment of diversity, equity, and inclusiveness to ensure all groups feel valued, actively engaged, and empowered. We realize that to be culturally conscientious takes an ongoing effort.

Starting at morning meeting, teachers ensure that culturally responsive teaching and learning occurs, in their daily interactions. As a result we were able to include both virtual and in-person students in the comradery of community building, supporting social and emotional learning, and fostering equity and inclusion in the classroom.

Our school has addressed current social and cultural events by focusing on empathy and changing mindsets. This year our Read Across America program celebrated diversity with a road map of the USA with milestones marked by books that represent a diverse nation.

A "Unity Tree" was established outside our building. The goal of the tree is to have a central, highly visible, outdoor spot for our school to display support for social justice causes in alignment with the goals of the district's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee. During the

month of February, the tree was dedicated to honoring Black History Month. In March, we focused on honoring Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month. Student-made puzzle pieces were hung to represent autism awareness and the understanding that our differences are what makes us unique and fit together. The month of April will represent students of military families to support The Month of the Military Child.

We have installed our very own Story Walk right on our property to feature a monthly book. It starts at the base of the Unity Tree and continues up along the pathway past the garden beds and towards Navy Housing. Our goal is to create opportunities for family engagement to experience literature through a variety of diverse books in both our school and neighborhood community. The featured book changes to coincide with the theme of the Unity Tree. For example, one of the focus books was *The Sneetches* because it addressed several important themes around prejudice, discrimination, oppression, and privilege. Another book we chose, *The Invisible Boy*, highlights how an act of kindness helps to make him begin to feel more a part of his community.

Teachers support our students being unapologetically who they are. Teachers meet students academically where they are on the learning trajectory and support them with an array of diverse materials. When students feel connected in their learning environment, they are willing to take academic risks. Our school wide goal is to continue to increase positive interactions where all feel welcome!



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

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The one practice that has been the most instrumental to our school's continued ability to successfully support students since school closures began is parental engagement. The impact of the pandemic required both immediate and long-term strategies for engaging students and their families in distance learning. The district acted immediately, ensuring the meals, Chromebooks, and the Wi-Fi parents needed to engage in distance learning. But, our staff, had to dig deeper and create a blueprint to meaningfully and equitably equip families of our preschool - grade 5 students to support long-term learning at home.

While the connection between parental engagement and student success is true for all of our students, it is especially important for our highly mobile military families, our English language learners, and our special education students. We quickly realized we needed a plan to close the digital divide and build online relationships with parents in order to support our students emotionally and academically.

Our typical parent engagement practices would not be enough – we would need to adapt and refine to ensure the achievement gap did not grow for our most at risk students. We started by developing a parent focus group to collaboratively build a remote learning framework and followed up by creating a series of parent feedback surveys ensuring we heard all voices and developed instruction that supports all students. Teachers put in place specific supports for families in their role as partner educators providing them the skills required to support learning at home. Toolkits and hands-on materials were distributed. Our special educators, therapists, and speech pathologists made sure parents had the programs, systems, and technology that the students were using at school. It was especially important that attendance data and our high-expectations were consistently shared with all families to ensure student participation. To support our highly mobile military students, our secretary became a first line of defense and was able to problem solve with the parents of newly enrolled students to get their child connected to their new remote classroom community.

As the pandemic continued, we learned to capture the untapped teaching potential within families, which became a powerful collaboration! Going forward, we need to continue to leverage parents as partners. We have been given the opportunity to reboot the relationship between school and home. When things return to “normal,” our school will start by asking ourselves, “What did we do well to ensure engagement and equitable conditions for learning?” And then make what we have learned part of our on-going practice.