

**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 Dana Liberton  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name North Kirkwood Middle School  
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 11287 Manchester Road  
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Kirkwood State MO Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 63122-1122

County St. Louis County

Telephone (314) 213-6170 Fax (314) 213-6177

Web site/URL https://www.kirkwoodschoools.org/Domain/10 E-mail dana.liberton@kirkwoodschoools.org

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 David Ulrich E-mail david.ulrich@kirkwoodschoools.org  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Kirkwood School District R-VII Tel. (314) 213-6101

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. JeanMarie Andrews  
(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):
- 5 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
  - 2 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	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	118	113	231
7	90	96	186
8	121	103	224
9	0	0	0
10	0	0	0
11	0	0	0
12 or higher	0	0	0
<b>Total Students</b>	329	312	641

\*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):
- 0.2 % American Indian or Alaska Native
  - 1.7 % Asian
  - 4.7 % Black or African American
  - 4.2 % Hispanic or Latino
  - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - 83.1 % White
  - 6.1 % 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: 3%

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	8
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	11
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	19
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2019	639
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.03
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	3

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

(Spanish) (Swahili) (Portuguese)

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 0 %

3 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 9 %

Total number students who qualify: 56

8. Students receiving special education services: 17 %

112 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>22</u> Autism	<u>3</u> Multiple Disabilities
<u>0</u> Deafness	<u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment
<u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness	<u>21</u> Other Health Impaired
<u>0</u> Developmental Delay	<u>26</u> Specific Learning Disability
<u>7</u> Emotional Disturbance	<u>27</u> Speech or Language Impairment
<u>2</u> Hearing Impairment	<u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury
<u>4</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: 12

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.	46
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	11
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	0
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	6

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 12:1

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	96%	96%	96%	96%	96%
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. 1996

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

Students of North Kirkwood Middle School will think critically and creatively, driven by a sense of wonder, connection, and joy. Working together, we will ensure all students are prepared for success - now and in the future.

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.

At the start of the 2020-2021 School Year all students and staff were working virtually. All students have a school issued iPad, and all staff have a school issued laptop and iPad. Students were following an A/B day schedule.

November 9, 2020: Families were provided with two options: 1. Remain virtual only. 2. Return to in-person learning from 8:00am-12:30 pm Monday through Thursday. All students were virtual from 1:45 pm-3:00 pm. All students learn virtually on Friday.

March 15, 2021: Families continue to have two options: 1. Remain virtual only. 2. Return to in-person learning for a full school day 8:00 am-3:00 pm Monday through Thursday. All students learn virtually on Friday.

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

We are a public school who serves all eligible students who reside within our school district boundaries. We also participate in the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation's school desegregation program. This provides students who live in a pre-identified area within the city limits of St. Louis to attend schools in the

St. Louis County area. Within this program the Kirkwood School District only accepts siblings of current students who also participate in this desegregation program.

## **PART III - SUMMARY**

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We have amazing students at North Kirkwood Middle School (NKMS). Our students come to us predominantly from our local community neighborhoods. We have a small number of students (12) who participate in the St. Louis Area School Desegregation program. These students travel each day from the city of St. Louis and participate in every opportunity provided by our school for all students. Our students are hardworking and love being active members of our school community. Often, the first thing that new teachers to our school notice about our students is that they are kind, loving, and highly engaged in their learning. Our students demonstrate an enthusiasm for learning and for making their learning community and their larger community a better place. We have activists, artists, athletes, poets, introverts, extroverts, and authors. We have students who have personal challenges. Our students create a learning environment that feels safe and welcoming for each child to be themselves and develop into happy young adults.

One of the essentials to our sustained success is that we hire and retain the very best teachers and staff available. Not only are our teachers experts in their instructional content area, but they truly understand the importance of creating a culture that focuses on the development of the whole child. We have amazing balance at NKMS. Our families trust and work in partnership with our teachers, counselors, and administrators to support the individual academic as well as social/emotional and developmental needs of each child in our care.

We have high academic standards and a strong curriculum to guide our work, while creating a learning environment that allows students and staff to pursue their passions. One unique opportunity, that is different from any school in our area, is that we annually devote one week of the school year to our “Pursuit Week,” in which students choose to study one topic for the entire week. All regular classes are suspended while students choose from approximately twenty-five different areas of study, such as scuba diving, creative writing, the business of professional sports, mock trial, fashion design, and the impact of music on society. This is a highlight of the school year for many of our students.

As additional evidence of our balanced approach, our counseling team works closely with students, families, and our instructional teams to ensure that the social/emotional needs of our students are being supported. Our counselors and building administrators routinely use curriculum, and outside organizations and programs to deliver information to our students and families. Examples include programs, such as “Signs of Suicide” and curricula such as “Second Steps,” which is designed to support social emotional learning. We partner with organizations such as The National Council of Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NCADA) and Barnes-Jewish Collaborative to provide lessons from experts in the field of social emotional and mental health. These organizations also provide resources and counseling for students and their families.

Throughout our COVID-19 experience, our students, staff, and families have transitioned through several changes to our learning delivery model. We have transitioned from a short period of a complete shutdown to a virtual model for all students. We then provided the option for families to choose virtual only or a blended model which included partial days of in-person learning and virtual. The next transition continued to provide families with the option to learn virtually only, as well as a full-day in-person learning option for four days per week. Throughout the COVID Pandemic, the key component to each phase has been communication with our staff and families. Our stakeholders recognized and trusted that all information and plans were communicated in a manner that specifically focused on our priority of keeping our students, staff, and families safely engaged.

North Kirkwood Middle School received the honor of being named a National Blue Ribbon School in 1996. Since that time, nearly 100% of our staff and families have turned over. What hasn’t changed at NKMS is the pride that our school community takes in being a proactive/positive place where students learn and grow academically and developmentally. We are a special place. Our staff, students, and community support are amazing. We are an inclusive environment that communicates and models high expectations, fostering wonder and joy for learning while building relationships with each child. Since 1996, the specific learning needs and expectations for meeting those needs have become more diverse, and our staff has become more skilled at meeting the needs for all our students. We have become more informed of our biases and the



need for creating a culture and instructional setting that is geared toward understanding and proactively supporting our students, families, and staff. Professional development strategies and models have been implemented to support staff growth in many areas. Specific examples include racial bias training, culturally responsive teaching, supporting the social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) needs of students, and supporting the needs of children on the autism spectrum.

It is common to hear from visitors to NKMS that it feels welcoming, comfortable, happy, or wonderful. Our families respect, admire, support, and love our teaching staff. It truly takes a village to raise our children and NKMS is a thoughtful, caring, and professional village doing amazing work to support our wonderful children.

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

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

The shift to virtual learning did not shift the focus of creating meaningful opportunities for our students. Throughout virtual learning lessons, teachers utilized formative check-ins to drive instruction and determine the needs of the individual learner. Teachers used online tools, such as Edpuzzle and Gimkit, to engage students and assess their learning, while also finding ways to provide supports for students using individualized and small group instruction in breakout rooms and during “office hours.” Instructors planned for teaching virtually by considering both learning targets and where students were in their learning progression. This helped them decide what type of technology and learning activities to use. The end goals remained the same, but how the instruction was delivered changed.

When students are developing a conceptual understanding, it is important to implement tasks that promote reasoning and problem solving. The tasks need to have “low floors and high ceilings” so that they allow for multiple entry points and varied solution strategies. Teachers provided differentiated experiences online through self-paced assignments, offering modified multi-modal versions for students who require more repetition to master content, and enrichment/extension opportunities as well.

A clear scope and sequence in every curriculum area promotes critical reading, writing, and thinking, and promises consistent instruction for all students. For example, in English/Language Arts, sixth-grade students explore self-identity through narrative writing. In seventh grade, students focus on “the other” and provide thoughtful evidence and reasoning while writing literary analysis responses. And eighth-grade students explore group identity and further develop their craft by writing argumentative, blended, and multi-genre pieces with a focus on civil discourse, voice, and choice.

The team of science educators uses a process-driven curriculum aligned with the Next Generation of Science Standards (NGSS) and Missouri Science Standards. All students are scientists investigating phenomena to gain a sense of the wider world. Sixth graders launch rockets as physical scientists; seventh graders raise bees and chickens as life scientists; and eighth graders observe the universe as earth scientists.

Our core social studies curriculum for 6th graders includes the study of World Geography, Culture, and Citizenship. In 7th grade, they study United States history from early settlements in North America through the Reconstruction Era. Finally, eighth grade students pan to a wider view of the world as they explore ancient history from the beginnings of humanity through the Bubonic Plague outbreaks of the Middle Ages. We meet students where they are and support them in their learning journey.

Our math department offers content spanning five years of curriculum so that students can access the level that suits their needs. Making connections is a critical component so students can deepen their understanding. Teachers strive to facilitate meaningful mathematical discourse so all students can build a shared understanding of ideas as they learn.

Our young scientists engage in extension courses which provide opportunities to engage in science beyond the classroom through both school and community projects, such as involving the removal of invasive species, building a chicken coop from recycled materials, and promoting “green school” ideals, such as developing no-idling zones in the parking lot. Our goal has been to help students develop an understanding of what the world looks like physically and culturally, and how people connect with institutions and each other around the world. Social Studies students practice these skills with an emphasis on building historical understanding through an examination of multiple perspectives, primary/secondary sources, and opportunities for civil discourse. In all areas, they craft arguments using claim, evidence, and reasoning to support their positions and findings about the places, cultures, peoples, and governments around the world.

Teachers incorporate “windows and mirrors” by using diverse texts, and students are exposed to whole-class, small group, and independent reading opportunities. Using the workshop model, English/Language Arts students study organization, character, setting, and theme. They participate in non-fiction and social issues book clubs and discover their reading identity while building reading stamina. Engaging activities and

assessments, including simulations, book clubs, Socratic seminars, debates, and mock trials, allow our students to apply their learning to real world situations. Students have engaged in field trips to the Cahokia Mounds World Heritage site, the St. Louis Art Museum, the Missouri Botanical Gardens, and the St. Louis Holocaust Museum, among others. Other hands-on approaches include craftwork such as creating cuneiform tablets using clay and the art room kiln.

Assessment data is collected through our universal screenings during benchmarking periods. These assessments, as well as formative and common summative assessments, are used to identify students performing at, above, and below grade-level expectations and to tailor instruction to best support their needs. Teachers use assessments to guide instruction, monitor progress, and support academic achievement, while students use data to guide their learning. Results are analyzed to create flexible, differentiated groupings.

When needed, students are placed in Reading Intervention classes based on teacher concerns and benchmark assessments, such as FastBridge and Insight. Following a Data Team review, students receive individualized instruction for phonological processing, fluency, and/or comprehension. Progress monitoring identifies the intervention's success and charts a course of action. Technology-based support is provided for all, and students have access to audiobooks through Learning Ally.

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

At NKMS, all curricula support college and career readiness. Our school is focused on the 21st century learning skills of literacy, critical thinking, problem solving, civil discourse, and well-being. In addition to core classes, students may choose among a variety of core extension classes for further challenge and support. The Great Outdoors, Ecology, Forestry, and Zoology courses introduce students to careers in Earth and Biological Sciences. Economics introduces students to the basics of entrepreneurship and explores careers in Business and Finance. Students interested in writing careers may choose Journalism or Yearbook. If a student is interested in pursuing a legal or business career, Debate may be recommended.

Teachers and counselors deliver lessons in partnership with Junior Achievement of Greater St. Louis (STL) where the focus is helping students find their passions/interests along with middle school skills to develop college/career awareness and readiness. Some students elect to join after-school clubs to pursue those interests. Looking to The Future club members, for example, have taken field trips to local community colleges and universities as well as tech schools. Whether students elect to take a core extension class or join a club, they hear from experts and guest speakers frequently.

One of the most engaging and immersive opportunities for students to explore potential careers is NKMS Pursuit Week. Regular classes are suspended for one week as the entire staff and student body dedicates their time to this unique experience. Students get an entire week to immerse themselves in an interest/passion -- forensics, law, sports-business, beekeeping, forestry, music, or activism -- to name a few. No matter the chosen topic, they hear from experts, take field trips, and conduct research that prepares them for exciting futures. Many of the experts happen to be NKMS alumni. While students have the opportunities to explore what interests them, they also get a chance to actively serve others through learning about non-profit organizations.

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

## **2. Other Curriculum Areas:**

NKMS is focused on whole student wellness. Whether in-person or virtual, teachers encourage students to maintain a balance between physical and social-emotional health. From team games and activities in class to discussions and assignments on Feel Good Friday, the cornerstone of the Wellness Department is built on enhancing students' strengths and creating an environment where all feel safe to be themselves.

All students are viewed as visual artists at NKMS, not simply "students of the arts." We embrace a learning philosophy derived from Harvard's Project Zero, where we learn and work each day living the Eight Artist Studio Habits, growing ourselves as literate artists - we read, write, and speak to better understand ourselves and the world around us. Process is more important than the final product. We use sketchbooks daily to capture thinking, planning and experimentation while developing artistic ideas. Encouraging artists to develop the life skills of creative and innovative thinking alongside critical and problem-solving skills are essential to their success beyond the art studio.

Whether students go on to a career in music or become life-long music enthusiasts, the Vocal Music department facilitates an appreciation for music as an art form and a form of communication. Through listening, performing, moving, and creating, students make connections to other curricula and their own lives. Our students have the opportunities to compete as soloists, choirs, and composers, and we are very proud of their numerous awards. We have had students successfully compete on the St. Louis Talent show and the Voice. They shine in multiple competitions and have landed record deals.

The Drama Department at North is designed to support and develop a student's passion for theatre. Our program consists of two parts. While taking Drama classes, students engage in learning, discussions, and projects centered around the fundamentals and history of Drama, play and script analysis, and modern acting theory. The second part of the program is a robust extracurricular play production experience. Every year we produce two full-length productions, one play and one musical. Hundreds of students participate. They act, sing, and dance in the productions. Others build and paint sets, make costumes, program and run lights and sound boards, and even assistant direct!

North Kirkwood Middle School offers world language classes in Spanish, French, and German. The goal of the world language department is to help students start their journey of becoming proficient in another language while encouraging them to explore and appreciate other cultures around the world. Students practice speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills in the target language within the classroom during their years at NKMS, and are then able to use their skills outside the classroom during a trip to Europe after eighth grade.

In our Engineering courses, we follow the curriculum for Project Lead the Way. Many students decide to pursue this passion by joining the award-winning Robotics team. We are proud of our two-time Missouri State Robotics Champions and World Championship Qualifier. Students design and innovate as part of a team, experience failure, persevere, and emerge confident in their abilities to positively impact their world.

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

North Kirkwood Middle School is an exciting and welcoming place for all learners. Through the examination of various data points including academic and behavioral, and through observation, we are able to identify students who need additional help or more enrichment. Benchmarks in both reading and math, through Fastbridge and Illuminate, are conducted three times per year for all as the school investigates data that show patterns of weaknesses. In addition, students who qualify for Multi-Tiered Support System (MTSS) for math and reading services are progress monitored with curriculum-based measures throughout the year to highlight efficacy of interventions. Multiple pieces of data are reviewed to gain a complete picture of the learner.

After a set period of time, the interventions are evaluated by the school data team to determine if there is a need for special education services. If the documented intervention data indicates the child needs specialized instruction, the student will receive those services, pending the eligibility of state and federal criteria. When the student qualifies, a new meeting is set within 30 days to create an initial Individualized Education Program (IEP) by the special education teacher/case manager. It is imperative that all voices are heard to address student needs based on qualifying data. An annual IEP meeting is held to review all information and give a final report on goal achievements and an update/revision of all other parts of the IEP. Goals are updated each quarter.

In addition to special education services, NKMS identifies students who require enrichment activities through our gifted program (SOAR), 504 Plans, English Language Learners (ELL), and emotional/behavioral needs.

With all these services, there is much that goes on behind the scenes which is one of the things that makes NKMS a wonderful place. Our special education department has adopted the nationally known Best Buddies program which pairs students with high needs with peers of the same age who are typically developing. The students meet throughout the year and engage in a variety of structured and unstructured social activities. It is a dynamic and exciting program that is celebrated for its inclusion of all students.

Another outreach that NKMS offers to students is for those with economic needs. We provide groceries to students and their families each weekend. This is done discreetly by placing bags of groceries in lockers of students during class time. In addition, students have the opportunities to obtain school supplies from the counselors at no charge. When families are in crisis, our school is able to access immediate funds from a branch of our PTO called NorthCares that fundraises for the sole purpose of helping those in need.

Our ELL services are formulated based on the level of English proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing of each student. We create individualized programs and put in place specific accommodations that address the needs of students and tap into their strengths.

Our programs take into consideration the background of students and their families. We pay close attention to cultural differences, academic, social, and emotional health. Our focus is on educating and reaching the whole child by providing academic and social-emotional tools to help shape a healthy and well-rounded person.

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

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

At NKMS, we believe in the R4 which states that at North Kirkwood Middle School, “I am responsible for my learning, character, respect, and relationships.” This statement is read by students each morning and is something we often discuss and consistently model for our students. By giving students responsibility and providing them a positive, supportive environment to achieve success in their learning, character, respect, and relationships, we are engaging and supporting their overall growth.

As a staff, we truly pride ourselves in providing a positive environment for all students to grow. One way we do this is by the regular use of positive reinforcement and acknowledgment. We believe that all students have strengths, and that those strengths should be celebrated and praised. Every adult in the building can write a “positive referral” for any student at any time. In years past, this positive referral would come with a positive note sent home to family, a certificate, and a gift card to a local ice cream shop. Since moving to remote learning, these positive referrals come with a positive email home, a certificate, and these positive referrals are read by our student NKMS News Team on our daily news for the entire school.

Another way that we celebrate our students' academic, social, and emotional strengths within our school community is by using weekly Student of the Week (SOW) recognition. Students are recognized for success and effort academically, kindness, responsibility, and/or by being a positive peer influence among others. Names are announced on our daily schoolwide news broadcast and emailed home to all families in our weekly newsletter. Since going to remote learning, we have also placed yard signs celebrating Students of the Week in front of our students' homes to share their accomplishments with the community.

We want our learners to feel seen, heard, and valued, as a means to motivate, engage, and support them. We do this by giving all students opportunities to share their stories and their voices through student-led organizations and clubs, such as student council, student ambassadors, news team, and many others. Within these opportunities, students are given the chance to lead, share, and grow. Each of these groups provide an environment for students to feel connected to our school while taking a leadership role among peers.

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

A large part of our success at North Kirkwood Middle School is rooted in strong partnerships with parents and our community. For instance, when our PTO sponsored a Beautification Day last fall to transform our courtyard into an outdoor learning space, nearly 100 students and parents showed up on a Saturday morning donning gloves, boots, and equipment so they could make the vision become a reality. This same courtyard now houses chickens, bees, a greenhouse, and several raised bed gardens, all of which are cared for by students and shared with the community. Our chickens produce eggs for staff to purchase, our bees produce gallons of local honey that is sold to Kirkwood residents, and our gardens grow fruits and vegetables that can be shared with local food pantries. Similarly, when our school sponsors its annual food drive to stock the KirkCare Food Pantry, a dozen or more trucks are needed to haul the bounty. None of this is by accident; it is because we build spirit that permeates the entire community. As a result, our parents are also eager to participate in district committees, parent-teacher conferences, field trips, and anything else we need because they are part of our mission.

Kirkwood prides itself on supporting local businesses, and our local businesses are integral partners with our schools. Our community partners include local restaurants that sponsor our “Braggin’ Bulldog” lunches and local leaders who speak to students about their careers and paths to leadership. We look for ways our students can give back, and as a staff, we do our part as well by routinely volunteering time on our weekends to package meals for Saint Louis (STL) Food Bank. It is experiences like these that unite us all and build community.

When the sense of community is strong, alumni want to return and engage in the schools. At NKMS, we capitalize on these local heroes as often as possible so our students can make connections to their current

learning and future possibilities. Last year alone we proudly welcomed the following alumni back to NKMS: Ahmad Hicks/KSDK News, Joanna Serenko/The Voice, Jeremy Maclin/Retired NFL, Trey Erby/Do You Music, and the Blair Family/EyeSeeMe Bookstore.

Mental/emotional health is a primary need for any child. We work with organizations ,such as CHADS Coalition, a St. Louis-based non-profit, teaching alongside our Health educators about suicide prevention and how to notify a trusted adult when concerned about a peer's well-being. We have an Educational Support Counselor who conducts child, family, and group therapy and works with our most at-risk students. Due to an identified need for more intentional connections to be made with students who were not meeting success in remote learning, we hired an Intentional Connector, a Social Worker who conducts home visits and helps families find district/community SEB resources. We also organized KSD NOW (Nutrition on the Weekends) for children experiencing food insecurity. During the pandemic, boxes were discretely distributed monthly to families.

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

At NKMS we have systems and norms in place that ensure our teachers' voices are heard and that collaboration occurs among administrators and teachers to best serve our students. These systems have been vital throughout the transitions we have made from our traditional model, to all virtual, to hybrid instruction. Our administration has established a culture where input is encouraged, and there are various opportunities for teachers to hold leadership roles in our building.

Our Building Leadership Committee, in which every department and grade level are represented, meets regularly to reflect on our practices, plan, and problem solve based on our current needs. When COVID-19 disrupted our entire school system, the Building Leadership Committee created new schedules, developed ways to provide consistent communication to parents and students, developed strategies to quickly meet the technological needs of online and hybrid learning, and set the tone for the emotional support that is needed during this time.

Our Professional Development Committee (PDC) teacher representatives play an active role in planning and executing our professional development, obtaining feedback from teachers, and sharing that feedback with our administrators. Our most recent PDC model has been so valuable that we are currently expanding teacher membership to bring more voices to the table and develop even richer conversations as we plan future professional development.

Our R4 committee provides another avenue for teachers and our assistant principal to directly address the social emotional needs of our students and teachers at North. The Social Committee encourages collegiality by hosting celebrations for our staff when we have babies, weddings, and other positive events, and helps provide support when times are tough. These committees and groups interweave our staff and create collisions that otherwise would not have occurred, strengthening our own staff culture, and ensuring we are united in approach.

At North, our staff also continually create opportunities for meaningful connections that allow us to grow together professionally. We have encouraged teachers to observe each other as both a support system and a tool for professional growth. We engage in book studies around school culture and equity that have led to changes in school practices and courageous conversations. Our staff seeks out independent professional development opportunities and are then encouraged to share their own learning with the rest of the staff. This year, we also have engaged in Zoom lunches to remain connected socially and grow professionally. For example, one group formed to collaborate around self-paced learning, specifically the Modern Classroom model. Another teacher created an open invitation for Chat-And-Chews once a week to provide a space for staff to reconnect. Although the formats have changed over the years, especially now with the effects of COVID-19, the strength of our building level professional development comes from our staff's ability to work together and willingness to share their strengths with others.

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

In a word, the leadership philosophy at North Kirkwood Middle School is collaborative. Decisions are made with input from a number of people on staff due to the structures and systems in place.

One of the best parts about working within a middle school is the “team” concept. In each grade level, for instance, four teachers share the same 100 students. Daily, their schedules are designed so they can meet to talk about concerns and celebrate successes, led by one of their colleagues who is designated as Team Leader. Weekly, the grade level counselor joins this group to make sure all the social-emotional needs are being met, in addition to the academic needs. When necessary, they will call upon administration and/or interventionists to further problem solve for students. Throughout this process is constant communication with families. It is truly a team effort that elicits leadership at an organic level to meet the needs of all students.

While each member of the school community is part of a team, they are also part of a department. It is within these departments that teachers engage in conversations about instructional strategies and delivery methods to best meet their students’ needs. Together, they analyze data from common assessments and use it to inform their instruction and identify holes. Each department is led by a colleague who is designated as the coordinator, and it is this colleague’s responsibility to advocate for their department’s needs. This model allows for all voices to be heard and for all colleagues to be supported on many levels.

In a school with close to 650 students and 90 adults, two administrators cannot lead alone, and the success of NKMS is built around building leadership capacity among our staff and creating systems that allow them to flourish. No one is relied upon more than the grade level counselors. Several years ago, NKMS made the decision to decrease its teaching staff by one person so that position could be allotted for another counselor. Now, each 6th grade class has a counselor assigned when they enter our school, and students keep that counselor for the duration of middle school. The connections and relationships that result from this model are immeasurable, and it is no doubt that our school has the level of success it does because of this model. From placing them on teams to ensuring proper accommodations to partnering with parents, they communicate with every cog in the wheel to make sure our students are socially, behaviorally, and academically thriving.

Leadership is not a top down philosophy at North Kirkwood Middle School. The administration understands that the school benefits from systems and structures that empower many individuals to assume leadership roles and for ownership to exist at all levels. When everyone works together, capacity is maximized and students grow. We are proud of the work our school does on behalf of students, and it is grounded in collaborative leadership.

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

Our teachers know that culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is not a trend and building relationships comes first. That means getting to know the culture and life experiences of students and families. We provide a “mirror” for all students to see themselves and a “window” where students can see the lives and experiences of others.

Representation of ALL learners is on display. The signage indicates that all are welcome and respected. Communication home is a priority with newsletters, e-mail updates, and phone blasts, which often include resources for parents to help them navigate current issues. For example, the day after the Capitol riots, resources were sent home and teachers were given materials to initiate conversations that day.

Students and families are surveyed regularly to determine needs. We work to get students and families what they need whether it is transportation, clothes, food, home visits, counseling or even a hot spot for reliable internet. Our school has an open-door policy. Students and families are encouraged to reach out to teachers, principals, counselors, social workers, etc. Survey data naturally informs our teaching. Daily time is built in for teachers to confer in order to reach every



child and family.

All staff participate in professional development centered around Culturally Responsive Teaching. Our outstanding Library/Media Specialist works closely with EyeSeeMe Bookstore, a local business that specializes in diverse literature. EyeSeeMe provides professional development, resources, and helped launch a club called Looking to The Future to give added support for students who could benefit from more exposure to positive representations of their culture. Our professional development centers on recognizing, celebrating, and including all “rings of culture.” Many teachers participate in voluntary readings and book clubs to inform CRT practices.

NKMS values and expects culturally relevant teaching in every content area. Sixth graders study cultural norms and how geography affects one’s culture. They make connections through world literature book clubs. Seventh graders examine perspective. What voices have been ignored or excluded? They read dystopian books, discussing the concepts of “equality” and “equity” in communities. Eighth graders examine the concept of what makes us human; why representation matters, and how have certain groups of people been dehumanized? Within our building, the Library is the epicenter of this work. Our Library/Media Specialist collaborates with teachers across content areas to ensure that equity and inclusion are embedded in our daily work. Our Library serves as a warm and welcoming place for every student and is a model of effective learning and collaboration.

Teachers make it a priority for students to see the cultural connections whether in the selection of songs, the artwork in a location, the inequities in health care resources worldwide, or the hidden figures in science.

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

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At NKMS, we are passionate and dedicated to developing positive relationships with our students, their families, and each other. These relationships are essential to the academic, social, and emotional success of our kids now and in their future. They are the building blocks for all other programs in our building, such as Second Steps, Restorative Practice, and MTSS.

Every day, our staff and students join to remember our building's focus - the "R4." It is through the R4, that we remind each other that we are each Responsible for our Learning, Character, Respect, and Relationships. Each day we meet with students in homeroom groups where time is dedicated to building community, trust, and friendships. We offer many after-school activities that are student-led and student-created based on their interests. You will also often find our teachers attending the students' plays, sporting events, and even visiting families at their home.

At NKMS, it is integral that we work in partnership with our families. We know that building relationships with our families is key to supporting the whole child. We reach out to our families often to provide daily support, financial needs, and community resources. We see ourselves as the shoulder families can lean on when they are in crisis and the cheerleaders' families can appreciate with each success.

As a result of our authentic interest in each child and his/her story, we develop meaningful and lasting relationships with our students. The foundation of our success is based upon the trust and relationships that we build within our learning community. Throughout our COVID-19 experience, it was these strong relationships that helped us realize that just because our school doors were physically closed, it didn't mean that our relationships ended, rather, they grew. We were able to lean on and support one another in ways that have been invaluable to our mental health.

Immediately after the shutdown order, the staff at NKMS set out to learn how to best meet our students' needs. Whether it was learning new and engaging ways to connect with students virtually or just sending an extra email to check in, we made sure our kids knew we cared. We offered Webinars and Zoom conferences with our families to continue reaching and supporting them. Our students felt safe to allow us into their homes virtually because they know we are all family.

How we build relationships continues to evolve as we have new tools and ideas. However, our core belief in doing what our kids need has not wavered. As our principal stated in a letter to families, "I am SO proud of the staff at NKMS and the child-centered, collaborative culture that together, we've created." His message speaks to who we are and what we value most - relationships.