

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

[X] Public or [] Non-public

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

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

Official School Name Walter M Schirra Elementary School
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 1 Awn Street
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Old Bridge State NJ Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 08857-1819

County Middlesex County

Telephone (732) 360-4495 Fax _____

Web site/URL https://www.oldbridgeadmin.org/o/wses E-mail clowery@obps.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* Mr David Cittadino E-mail dcittadino@obps.org
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Old Bridge Township Tel. (732) 566-1000

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 Ms Jill DeCaro
(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

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

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):
- 11 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
 - 2 Middle/Junior high schools
 - 1 High schools
 - 0 K-12 schools
- 14 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	16	17	33
1	23	21	44
2	19	27	46
3	18	15	33
4	22	26	48
5	23	25	48
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
Total Students	121	131	252

*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 % American Indian or Alaska Native
 - 28 % Asian
 - 4 % Black or African American
 - 6 % Hispanic or Latino
 - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - 56 % White
 - 6 % 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: 7%

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.

Steps For Determining Mobility Rate	Answer
(1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	9
(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)]	20
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2019	284
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.07
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	7

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

Albanian, Arabic, Bangba (Abangba), Bengali, Chinese, Gujarati, Hindi, Malayalam, Nepal Bhasa (Newar), Nepali (Pahari), Panjabi (Punjabi), Portuguese, Russian, Sindhi, Spanish, Tagalog, Telugu

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

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 10 %

Total number students who qualify: 24

8. Students receiving special education services: 20 %
50 Total number of students served

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

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>26</u> Autism | <u>1</u> Multiple Disabilities |
| <u>0</u> Deafness | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness | <u>2</u> Other Health Impaired |
| <u>0</u> Developmental Delay | <u>4</u> Specific Learning Disability |
| <u>0</u> Emotional Disturbance | <u>9</u> Speech or Language Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Hearing Impairment | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury |
| <u>0</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>1</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 2
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.

	Number of Staff
Administrators	1
Classroom teachers, including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	12
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	15
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	17
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 24:1

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

Required Information	2019-2020	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016
Daily student attendance	97%	97%	95%	95%	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.

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

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

Yes No

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

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

Schirra's mission is to inspire the love of learning, embrace diversity, and cultivate a caring, respectful, supportive environment that is conducive to empowering individual achievement.

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.

September 3, 2020: Fully remote schedule.

October 12, 2020: 33% in-person Cohort schedule began: Students reported in person on Monday (Cohort A), Wednesday (Cohort B), or Friday (Cohort C). Fully remote schedule on Tuesday and Thursday for all students. Phase in, starting with Kindergarten and Special Education/Self Contained reported in person on their assigned Cohort day.

October 19, 2020: 1st, 2nd & 3rd Grades reported in person on their assigned Cohort day.

October 26, 2020: 4th & 5th Grades reported in person on their assigned Cohort day.

November 23, 2020: Entire student body and staff were back to a fully remote-only instruction schedule.

February 16, 2021: 66% in-person Cohort Schedule began: Students reported in person on Monday & Tuesday (Silver Cohort) or Thursday & Friday (Purple Cohort). Fully Remote instruction on Wednesday for all students. Special Ed/Self-Contained and students with a 504 and an IEP reported in person on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday & Friday (Gray Cohort). Parents had the option to have their student remain fully remote. Staff taught in-person and remote students

simultaneously from their classrooms.

February 16, 2021: Kindergarten, Special Education/Self Contained, students with a 504 or an IEP reported in person on their assigned Cohort days.

February 22, 2021: 1st, 2nd & 3rd grades reported in person on their assigned Cohort days.

March 1, 2021: 4th & 5th grades reported in person on their assigned Cohort days.

May 3, 2021: All cohorts able to attend 5 days per week. School still runs on an early dismissal schedule.

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

Nestled amongst the trees in its own tucked away corner, Walter M. Schirra Elementary School is hidden away. The comfort and quiet of the neighborhood school contrasts with the hustle and bustle of the large suburban town of Old Bridge and the short 35-mile distance to New York City. Our namesake, Walter Marty Schirra, was an innovator paving the way for future astronauts as he was one of seven tasked with the United States' goal to have humans in space for the first time. With his name emblazoned on our school, we see ourselves in much of the same light as innovators and paving the way in education, creating unique and successful programs to support the whole child in each of our students. As the home of the district's program for students with autism, Schirra has the distinct honor of being a champion for inclusion, providing a different view of diversity and creating a community where students can learn skills that will provide the foundation of their success in the world.

As you walk through the front doors, you are greeted by the Be Kind Wall and Be Kind Mural, which shares our guiding principle of Be Kind with all who enter the building. The Be Kind Wall highlights students as models for their peers who work as ambassadors to promote kindness. A yearlong project, the Be Kind Mural is a mosaic mural created to represent our community through tiles hand crafted by students and staff. With a focus on character education and social-emotional learning, the Be Kind initiative and other programs such as Art Soup, Play Unified, Tiger's Den and more have led to Schirra being named a State and National School of Character twice in addition to earning five Promising Practice distinctions for programs that are impactful for character development and creating community. Through this character-focused lens, we understand that by addressing the needs of the whole child it provides each student the opportunity to reach their full potential academically.

Be Kind fosters an environment where students can take academic risks, challenge themselves and achieve beyond their goals because the culture and community are based and founded in acceptance, inclusion and understanding, all of which provide the foundation for academic success. Our student population is diverse in their academic needs: we serve students learning how to communicate effectively with alternative augmentative communication (AAC), students who need support of foundational math and language arts skills, as well as students in the district's gifted and talented program. Many programs help to address the varying academic needs of students including the Response to Intervention (RTI) program, Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) framework and Challenge program. Every decision is based on what is best for each student.

Our guiding principles have remained the same despite three changes in our principal since 2015. This is evident by consistent committees and roles that allow various stakeholders to be a part of the decision-making process. Families take an active role through committees such as Parent Advisory Council, School Safety Team, Special Education Parent Advisory Group, surveys, and informal conversations, all of which allows the constant evaluation of programs, initiatives, and academics. Community members take part in our whole child advocacy through partnerships with therapy dog owners, the Old Bridge Police Department and more. Classroom jobs, principal lunch bunch, and student council are examples of leadership roles for our students. Additionally, Schirra's staff was recognized in the Top 100 in New Jersey as rated by Niche. This rating speaks volumes to the determination, demanding work and dedication of the staff, something that is evident without such a wonderful accolade.

During COVID-19, our school, like all, was faced with a new reality. Throughout the pandemic we have provided instruction both remotely and through in-person hybrid models at varying times. Many of our students have family members who are essential workers which exacerbated an already demanding situation. We adapted to these new challenges and requirements with flexibility to ensure our students have their most basic needs, such as safety and connection, met so they can be optimally available to learn. We maintained certain daily activities in new ways. For example, morning announcements completed by students were now posted on Flipgrid, the counselor continued a daily good morning by posting it on social media, and morning meeting occurred virtually. Additionally, we continued events for connection such as Tiger Time, Fitness Night, Paint Night, and encouraging videos from staff. Through Twitter, Microsoft Teams, a school counselor website, Friday weekly emails, and the district website, resources were provided to families,

inclusive of resources to explain COVID to their children, activities while maintaining social distance, how to set-up a school space at home, and state and community resources for support. Staff were offered support such as self-care outlets and professional development for technology and behavioral supports. As evident by this past year, education is always changing; however, Schirra's commitment to the whole child, character education and social-emotional learning, and academic achievement is steadfast in its guiding principles and adaptable to the needs of the Schirra community.

PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

1. Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.

Schirra's core curriculum is a rigorous, cross-curricular implementation of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS). Teachers strive to provide students with work that is not simply clicking the correct answers; students are continuously challenged to be critical, analytical, and creative thinkers while also learning to express their ideas, explanations, and opinions in both verbal and written format. On a continuous basis, detailed feedback is provided to all students, whether one on one or in small groups. Having the students take leadership in critiquing their own work and the work of their peers pushes them to take ownership of their learning and progress. Teachers foster their sense of independence and responsibility so that students take ownership of their behavior, which is a huge factor in learning. Moreover, teachers help children develop a growth-mindset so that they are emotionally equipped to embrace challenges that lay ahead of them each year.

Reading / English Language Arts:

Schirra teachers are passionate about ELA instruction, and infusing it throughout the entire day to help our K-5 students become excellent readers and writers. We utilize the Journeys Program, a balanced literacy approach, with components such as read-aloud, guided reading, shared reading, guided writing, and phonics/word study. The guided reading and writing processes allow teachers to work closely on reading strategies and writing instruction with small groups of students while other students are engaged in differentiated, meaningful learning centers. Primary grade teachers employ Project Read Phonics strategies to assist the development of reading fluency. In writing, responding to informational text, and literature, students are expected to successfully cite evidence from the text to support their positions, statements, or arguments. Students write narrative, argument, and informative/explanatory pieces using graphic organizers, self-assessment rubrics, and model pieces.

Mathematics:

We use enVision math as one of our primary means of teaching the NJSLS. Understanding multiple methods for solving problems helps students comprehend mathematics in a more meaningful way. Teachers present problem-solving activities, use them in whole-class instruction or differentiated math centers, and assist students in monitoring and reflecting on the problem-solving process. When solving word problems, students will utilize a unique four-square graphic organizer that provides a structure to attack the scenario. In addition to enVision resources, our teachers use a plethora of other materials including XtraMath and Prodigy. These sites motivate and engage students while building math fluency.

Social Studies:

Our school's social studies curriculum is derived from the NJSLS and aims to have our students be civic minded, globally and culturally aware, socially responsible, and mindful of numerous viewpoints. Teachers utilize Houghton Mifflin's textbook series in conjunction with many supplemental materials such as Newsela, Scholastic News, BrainPOP, and Discovery Education. Students are active participants in debates, opinion writing, and various other forms of civic engagement.

Science:

Our school is transitioning to the Next Generation Science Standards. Students in Grades K- 5 learn about topics including physical properties, plant life cycles, renewable and nonrenewable resources, and many others. Schirra's science program provides an inquiry rich program that focuses on application of content through practices and laboratory activities that deepen science understanding. The use of Newsela helps to create critical scientific thinkers who examine not only the scientific process, but the impacts of scientific discoveries. With the transition to the NGSS, increased focus on the STEM design loop has occurred. A building-based Makerspace is in the process of being constructed to support these activities.

Adaptations for 2020-21:

The district altered the daily schedule to an early dismissal schedule, alleviating the need for lunch at school and allowing for students needing additional help on assignments or skills to meet with teachers individually in the afternoon. Since the schedules of each family are so different, a Night School was set up where teachers for each grade were available Monday-Thursday for students to meet with for extra help.

Our district utilized a variety of schedules during the 2020-21 school year, depending on the COVID-19 transmission rate in the area, including fully remote, 33% hybrid, and 50% hybrid. During hybrid instruction, one or two days per week were fully remote as well. Teachers quickly became quite adept at using our district's online platform, Microsoft Teams. This allowed for live meetings, asynchronous assignment distribution and collection, breakout rooms, private chats for conferencing and feedback, and more.

During the summer of 2020, a select group of educators created instructional videos in each grade for all major subjects for the first weeks of instruction. These videos could be used by district teachers as a guide for creating their own content or to supplement their instruction. These videos provided teachers with content and grade-specific examples of how lessons should be taught remotely, what materials should be used, what pacing should look like, and how to structure the lesson. It provided a concrete example of how to tackle this completely new way of teaching, along with a support for the beginning of the year.

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

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

2. Other Curriculum Areas:

Visual and Performing Arts:

All Kindergarten through Fifth Grade students receive instruction in the visual arts and choral music for 43 minutes per week. The art program allows students to make connections to core subjects, cultures, historical moments, and social emotional learning. Students' artwork is celebrated and showcased in the school hallways and bulletin boards, around the community, the District Art Festival, Schirra Annual Art and Music Festival, and various submissions to local poster contests. It provides children with the tools necessary for the development of higher order thinking skills while allowing them an avenue of expression. The goal of the art program is to provide children with the means to communicate verbally and visually with the world around them.

In choral music students learn about beat vs rhythm, melody, tempo, dynamics, music history, music in culture, the families of orchestra, musicals and operas, and various styles of music. The instrumental music program at Schirra is open to all 4th and 5th grade students who wish to participate. Schirra instrumental music has also recently opened guitar instruction and will continue to offer other new exciting instrumental opportunities to our students. The philosophy of our visual and performing arts program is that anyone can make music and art.

Foreign Language:

Students are introduced to Spanish in 4th and 5th grades utilizing a program teaching basic phrases, words and introductory skills. Through this exploration, students are prepared for middle and high school where their choice in a world language is expanded to include French, Italian, German and Mandarin and having a better understanding of how a world language class is taught. Also, some students are exposed to American Sign Language in classrooms to provide them an alternative way to communicate.

PE/Health/Nutrition:

Students participate in physical education by grade levels in the school's gymnasium. All grades have a combined 150 minutes per week of PE, health, and nutrition. During PE, students are exposed to formal sports activities such as football, soccer, floor hockey, and volleyball, and they also engage in a variety of cooperative learning games. Health and nutrition are taught several times a week by classroom teachers covering topics such as a balanced meal, digestive system, and conflict resolution. Students and staff are members of the Play Unified a Special Olympics Champion School. In the Unified Club members with and without intellectual disabilities come together at lunch for sports, games, community service events, and school events.

Technology:

The students at Schirra are introduced to technology in the computer lab and classrooms that meaningfully enhances and optimizes learning daily. Schirra has expanded its technology in the last two years allowing for 1:1 devices. Students in grades k-2 have HP 360X with touchscreen features and students in grades 3-5 have HP Streams. Students in the computer lab learn various software programs (Microsoft 360 Apps, Minecraft, Kahoot, OSMO Bots, and more.) Schirra technology teachers use various software and apps to allow students to explore a variety of STEAM projects, computer design, typing instruction, and to participate yearly in the Hour of Code. Students explore and build SEL skills during technology class by learning and understanding digital citizenship, using group work to build collaborative skills, and time management skills for longer projects. During COVID, technology skills became necessary in all aspects of life, and our staff provided lessons in new programs being used and established times to assist students with technological difficulties.

3. Academic Supports:

Teachers at Schirra work collaboratively to make sure that all students learn in creative and meaningful ways. For the past 8 years, Response to Intervention (RTI) supports students who are struggling and not meeting the standards on grade level. The RTI team (principal, school counselor, grade-level teachers, and interventionists) is a school-based, problem-solving team that exists to proactively address system needs by reviewing school-wide data (within grade levels and classrooms) and support individual student growth by helping to monitor progress and make decisions for students in each tier. Data is used to drive RTI decisions such as the need for services as well as movement between the tiers. At the beginning of the school year, teachers and interventionists administer a universal screener (EasyCBM and/or IXL) for reading and math and again in winter and spring for comparison and growth purposes. The RTI team disaggregates the assessment data, match, and place students into tiered scientific and evidence-based interventions or intervention groups. (This sentence reads awkwardly to me as written).

We utilize a three-tiered approach with varying levels of support beyond the general education, or core curriculum. Interventions are applied for a minimum of 6-8 weeks with progress monitoring data collected biweekly. At the Tier 1 level, the classroom teacher utilizes different targeted strategies such as flexible grouping, graphic organizers, centers, and Reflex Math. Traditional Tier 2 supports often use small-group instruction to provide increased monitoring and feedback. Whether in-person or virtual, small groups will meet and continue to interact and receive support through discussion groups, pre-recorded phonemic awareness lesson videos, interactive PowerPoints, interactive games like Kahoot, Project Read and student responses through Flipgrid (this sentence also reads awkwardly to me as written). If the child needs additional help to meet the standards, students are moved to tier-3 where we increase the duration, frequency and intensity of interventions. Furthermore, tier-3 groups are comprised of very small groups (1-3 students). During remote learning, Tier 2 and 3 students are seen more days and there is more time to schedule students for 1:1.

Beyond the RTI program, Schirra utilizes Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) for our students with autism. This therapy focuses on positive and consistent reinforcement to target academic, life, and social skills such as learning to zip up a coat or make change. The ABA program provides individualized plans for each student with specific goals and targets for that child. Additionally, Schirra uses inclusion to provide educational opportunities for all students, both special education and general education. Inclusion and ABA work together to provide students with peer models, reinforcement of positive behavior, as well as opportunities to use learned skills in a practical environment. Additionally, for students in general education, inclusion provides opportunities for collaboration, understanding and accepting diverse individuals, and reinforcement through modeling of skills. Furthermore, for students requiring additional resource services, assessments include the DRA (Diagnostic Reading Assessment) and specifically tailored interventions to assess their needs and provide an environment for academic success.

For students who exceed grade level, our Challenge Program provides specific opportunities from 2nd-5th grades. The Challenge Program (3rd-5th grades) allows identified students from different elementary schools in the district to meet weekly and complete projects and assignments that require out-of-the-box thinking, with higher-level discussions and questions under the tutelage of our Gifted and Talented Program teachers. Students in 2nd grade receive monthly classroom instruction. During these classroom visits, students are exposed to science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics (STEAM) projects such as the use of Ozrobots, an interactive robotic kit. Schirra believes that to provide the most effective education for all students, we must provide an effective education for each student.

PART V – SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

1. Engaging Students:

Creating well-rounded students who are active participants in their education and school community is vital to their growth. During morning announcements, the Schirra Pledge is read, a reminder of the Schirra expectations, including always doing our best and own work, standing up for one another and ourselves, and responsibly using our words and actions. This pledge is followed by a daily kindness challenge such as “encourage someone today” or “be patient with yourself.” A morning meeting focuses on building community within the classroom using discussions. These strategies set the tone for the day to be an inclusive, warm, and positive atmosphere with support on how to grow each day. The end of summer Back-to-School Meet and Greet invites new and current students and staff to an ice cream social for introductions and to build friendships so students are more comfortable on the first day. Student Appreciation Week recognizes our students through positive and fun experiences that celebrate their accomplishments, such as a visit with penguins from a local aquarium. Our Be Kind initiative includes many programs showing everyone can make a difference. One example is Kindness Ninjas, where one grade takes a field trip to spread kindness to another school in the district. Last year our kindergarten classes visited the high school and distributed KindBars (granola) to the students.

Students are supported and engaged academically in many ways through programs and philosophies. One program, PAWS to Read, invites students who are struggling readers to improve their literacy skills and foster a love of reading by reading to therapy dogs. Our teachers know that students are more engaged when topics are related to their lives or real-world situations, such as writing skills learned through writing letters to a local veterans’ home or through expressing how a paint chip color evokes a memory.

Preparing our students for college, career and the future is important. Kids at College discusses the importance of academics and education by introducing college experiences to 4th graders. Students take a field trip to a local college and engage in opportunities such as visiting an animal science lab or creating computer circuits. This program encourages conversations about the student’s future with their families. Classroom roles and jobs that students hold foster responsibility, collaboration, time management skills and following directions. Many industries utilize the same computer programs our students use, giving them understanding, knowledge, and comfortability with these programs. Throughout the year, students complete a self-evaluation and set goals to achieve, providing the groundwork for our students’ success in the future.

During COVID, students remained engaged with the Schirra community though a Microsoft Teams page for our school community which provided updates about upcoming events, spirit days, and pre-recorded morning announcements. Staff created videos to send positive messages to our students showing our support. Finally, students engage socially during Tiger Time, a monthly program where staff volunteers run programs such as relaxing art or game time for students to participate in a fun and positive environment.

2. Engaging Families and Community:

Families play a vital role in their student’s education, and creating a partnership allows Schirra to create the most beneficial environment for our students. Engaged through many means, families are active in the Schirra community. The Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and staff work together on many initiatives such as Painting and Pizza, a night event where families come together and create paintings led by the art teacher and have a pizza dinner together. Included in academic activities, families are invited to attend events for each grade level such as a Thanksgiving Feast, the Butterfly Exhibition Cycle where butterflies raised by students are released and a teambuilding activity that their students participated in to foster understanding, acceptance, and inclusion. These events are successful due to the communication we have with families through a variety of means including: Remind, Class Dojo, Friday emails, Twitter, and school websites as well as a positive communication contact with families in the beginning of each academic year by the classroom teacher.

Community members have been a wonderful resource to support our students and families whether in

academic, social, or emotional growth. The Old Bridge Police Department completes the Law Enforcement Against Drugs (LEAD) Program with 5th grade students yearly, covering topics such as peer pressure, while other community partners such as Footprints, Camp Fire and Child Assault Prevention (CAP) work with our younger students on important skills such as standing up for yourself, conflict resolution and friendship. Community service is a part of our values and we work closely with Precious Jules, an organization that promotes support for children and families impacted by childhood cancer, as well as Relay for Life and the Jump Rope for Heart initiatives, run by the art teacher and PE teacher, respectively. School improvement projects have been completed by Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts including a project focusing on the 6 pillars of character by a former Schirra student.

During this past year, families were engaged through several ways. A Pandemic Response Team was created which included staff, parents, and community members to discuss concerns, ideas and thoughts about the school and district's response to the pandemic. Night events to support parents and provide information and resources were scheduled. Finally, our Special Education Parent Teacher Association (SEPTA) created a "We Are One" initiative that had the Schirra community engage in learning American Sign Language to say "we are one," creating artwork for a district mural, and sharing what "we are one" means to them. Families and community members are invaluable resources to support student success and school improvement.

3. Creating Professional Culture:

The transition to remote and hybrid learning environments created many unknowns for staff professionally, as well as personally. As a result, it was important to ensure that staff were supported during this time of unforeseen circumstances. Trainings and resources were set-up both proactively and in response to requests. Trainings included learning how to utilize all the features of our learning platform Microsoft Teams, techniques to reach students who did not want to turn on their cameras and how to address behavioral concerns remotely. These staff resources went above and beyond providing professional support for staff and extended to personal support such as self-care, yoga, and virtual get-togethers. Furthermore, a survey was utilized to see what staff needed for support in areas they might have been struggling with. As a result of this survey, resources were created and posted in a separate channel of the staff Microsoft Teams page including diversity lessons, separating work from home, mindfulness, virtual rewards, and SEL (Social Emotional Learning) lessons. Finally, staff email shout-outs were sent to recognize staff for something positive. These various initiatives provided staff support both professionally and personally to ensure they feel valued and appreciated during such unprecedented times.

Beyond this past year, staff are involved in a variety of professional development opportunities to enhance learning about curriculums, new initiatives, new approaches, and many other topics. This learning happens in a variety of platforms such as staff meetings, professional learning communities, in-service development days, turn-key presentations, and shared resources. Topics are determined through requests from staff, district-wide initiatives, important ideas for our community or culture, and administratively selected. Creating a culture, goes beyond providing professional development. At Schirra we have different initiatives to create the professional culture we desire. One important way is through the Sunshine Committee, which celebrates personal achievements and milestones of staff, such as a new baby or engagement. This provides a personal connection amongst the staff and reinforces a friendlier and more collegial relationship. Furthermore, staff are recognized with an Educator of the Month award, nominated by peers, which allows staff the opportunity to celebrate the professional achievements of colleagues. In combination with Be Kind, staff modeled this behavior with the Staff RAK'd (Radom Act of Kindness) program, where staff would anonymously send 2 positive notes to a colleague with a small token to brighten their day. The staff support extends to our PTA, who created a Teacher Grant to help fund teacher requests so personal funds would not have to be used. Through these initiatives, we create a positive, inviting, and engaging culture where staff are excited to walk through the doors each day.

4. School Leadership:

Although the building principal is the administrator at Schirra, leadership of the school is shared among many. Teachers and school staff members are viewed and treated as trusted professionals who are experts in their craft. Parents, as the main advocates for their children, have an important position in decision making.

Student voice is also important in decision making.

Gathering feedback from various aspects of the school community is proactively done through various committees, each representing a unique aspect of the school. The Parent Advisory Committee helps share district and building achievement goals. The HIB/Character Education team plans ways to enhance school climate and address any patterns found in student conflicts. The Schirra PTA supports classroom initiatives and coordinates school-wide experiences. The Inclusion Committee examines efforts to promote tolerance and inclusion and recommends where successful strategies can be applied elsewhere. Students elect class representatives and officers to a Student Council. These representatives meet with the building principal to share thoughts and ideas, as well as discuss concerns that have been brought to their attention.

COVID-19's impact on schooling required a vast increase in the amount of communication, both coming from and going to the school. District and building leadership worked together to communicate the many actions taken to keep the school safe and functioning. Communication from district and building staff members increased to keep families apprised of information regarding school schedules, health and safety procedures, academic expectations, and enrichment opportunities. Although there were times where the district needed to be fully remote, every staff member worked to reach out to families and help students still feel connected to the school. Feedback in the form of parent surveys and pandemic committees helped inform decisions on everything from schedule to types of support needed.

Every single member of the school staff helped to assist our families. In addition to the new tasks associated with the virus, the school nurse also became the community's own personal translator of the guidelines set forth by national and local agencies. As those guidelines changed, the nurse helped everyone understand the changes and how they impacted each situation. The school counselor identified community resources for financial as well as mental health assistance available to families. The building secretary guided families through the procedures and how their personal situation fit in the new practices.

With just about every aspect of school life being altered, communication needed to be comprehensive and clear. When the building was reopened detailed communication was shared in several ways: via written procedural letters, posted video descriptions, and live Q&A sessions. This was deliberately done to give families reference materials they could review as needed, along with visuals to help families feel secure in sending their children into the school environment.

5. Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning:

Creating an equitable, respectful, culturally aware, and understanding atmosphere is important to fostering the whole child and ensuring all students feel welcomed and can be successful. These ideals are infused into curricular content and lessons throughout the school year across content areas such as social studies, language arts, art, writing, and specially focused weeks such as Inclusive Schools Week or Week of Respect. During these lessons, students are challenged to learn about historical figures, read a book or learn about a current event, leading to a timely and ever important conversation to address diversity, thus creating our respectful and inclusive community. Topics that have been addressed include Ruby Bridges, Martin Luther King Jr., understanding diverse abilities, awareness of disabilities, and cultural diversity through the program Art Soup. Art Soup allows our student leaders to learn and share both their own culture, as well as differing cultures that are present in our school community, using research and art projects. Students learn about the different cultures currently represented in our community, choose a country, and research a famous artist from that country. These students then create lessons to share with younger students about the country, such as location, schooling, weather, and housing, and create their own artwork in a style representative of their chosen artist. Current events are addressed through a curricular resource like Scholastic News, a short magazine on current news stories written for different grade levels. Additionally, Play Unified members spearhead modeling inclusion and acceptance of peers. Play Unified is a program fostered by the Special Olympics which joins students with and without disabilities on sport teams. Our Play

Unified team members interact beyond the sports field. Recently, Play Unified students took part in the Special Education Parent Teacher Association (SEPTA) initiative of “We Are One” by teaching peers sign language and the meaning of “We Are One” to them. While students are provided opportunities to discuss and address these topics, it is important that it is a conversation with staff and families as well. Resources are often provided through the school counselor newsletter, school website and Friday email for families, as well as Microsoft Teams page and professional development for staff. One specific example is after the riot at the Capital, articles and books were provided to staff to help foster a conversation about feelings they may be having, as well as discussing these events with students. Staff have also researched resources such as Teaching Tolerance for their understanding as well as to share with their students. Furthermore, our overall motto of “Be Kind” supports respectful words and behavior in the classroom and school community. We focus on choosing kindness over intolerance, understanding over being judgmental, and inclusiveness over divisiveness. Culturally responsive teaching and learning goes hand in hand with Schirra’s mission of supporting the whole child and including all.

PART VI - STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

The one practice that has been most instrumental in the school's continued ability to successfully educate students, both prior to and throughout the past year, is the expectation of excellence. Schirra has a long-standing reputation for high achievement and having higher standards than other schools. Teachers, parents, and students take pride in this reputation and work hard to maintain it. Staff members hold themselves to an extremely high guideline, always wanting to ensure that they are doing everything they possibly can to support their students. They give every ounce of themselves to their classes. In turn, students are expected to give that same amount of effort to achieve their highest potential. How are students motivated to give 110% every day? By building strong relationships with their teachers from the start.

This starts at the beginning of every day where students are greeted by name as they enter the building, classroom or virtual setting which instantly lets them know they are cared for and recognized as an individual. Teachers learn students' hobbies, sports, activities, and favorites through conversations to ensure they know the whole child and often ask how a recent game, competition or event turned out. Building relationships works two ways and it is equally as important for staff to share about themselves such as their family, or favorite activities so students know there is a level of trust. Furthermore, when students may need to be redirected or corrected, it is done with kindness, concern, privately as needed and care ensuring students feel safe to make mistakes and trust that if they do it will be handled thoughtfully. This guidance builds stronger relationships as teachers are not only there to support students when they are succeeding, but also when they need assistance.

The school community's expectation of excellence has continued, even with all the many challenges of the past year. Teachers continue to work around the clock to ensure they are meeting the academic as well as social-emotional needs of their students. Staff and students bounce ideas off each other about what lesson should be done next, what helped, what was enjoyed, and what should change. Since classes are a safe and nurturing space, students know their voices matter to their teachers, and staff let student honesty guide the class.

The relationships teachers cultivate with families allows staff the freedom to figure out the best way to instruct and nurture each child. Those relationships help to build confidence in our students, but they also motivate and instill the desire to succeed.