

***U.S. Department of Education***  
***2022 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program***

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[X] Public or [ ] Non-public

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

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

Official School Name The Birches Academy of Academics and Art Chartered Public School  
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 419 South Broadway 2nd Floor  
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Salem State NH Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 03079-4323

County Rockingham

Telephone (603) 458-6399 Fax \_\_\_\_\_

Web site/URL https://www.birchesacademy.org E-mail chrissmith@birchesacademy.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. Christopher Smith E-mail chrissmith@birchesacademy.org  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name State Chartered Public School District Tel. (603) 458-6399

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. Christie Storniolo  
(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 signatures 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 2016 and each tested grade must have been part of the school for the past three years.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 or 2021.
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. The nominated school has, or is subject to, a nondiscrimination policy (provide either a link to the policy or submit a text of the policy), is committed to equal opportunity for all students and all staff consistent with applicable law and does not have any outstanding findings of unlawful discrimination. The U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s nomination and/or rescind a school’s award if unlawful discrimination is later discovered.

12. 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.

**The U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school's nomination and/or rescind a school's award if one of these eligibility requirements is later discovered to have not been met or otherwise been violated.**

## PART II - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

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Data should be provided for the current school year (2021-2022) unless otherwise stated.

**DISTRICT** (Question 1 is not applicable to non-public schools. For charter schools: If a charter school is part of the public school system, information should be provided for the public school district. If a charter school is considered its own district or part of a charter district, the information provided should reflect that.)

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

**SCHOOL** (To be completed by all schools. **Only include demographic data for the nominated school, not for 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 in the school as of October 1, 2021 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	8	15	23
1	13	12	25
2	14	11	25
3	6	19	25
4	14	11	25
5	17	8	25
6	15	11	26
7	17	8	25
8	11	15	26
9	0	0	0
10	0	0	0
11	0	0	0
12 or higher	0	0	0
<b>Total Students</b>	115	110	225

\*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
  - 4.4 % Asian
  - 1.3 % Black or African American
  - 6.2 % Hispanic or Latino
  - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - 85.9 % White
  - 2.2 % Two or more races
  - 100 % Total**

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

5. Student turnover, or mobility rate, during the 2020 - 2021 school year: 9%

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, 2020 until the end of the 2020-2021 school year	11
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2020 until the end of the 2020-2021 school year	10
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	21
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2020	224
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.09
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	9

6. Specify each non-English language represented in the school (separate languages by commas):  
Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Ukrainian, Arabic, Thai, Tamil, Lithuanian, Cambodian, Lebanese, Romanian, Igbo, Haitian, Creole

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 8 %  
17 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 4 %  
 Total number students who qualify: 8

8. Students receiving special education services with an IEP or 504: 27 %  
61 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 with an IEP or 504 should be reflected in the table below. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>6</u> Autism                  | <u>0</u> Multiple Disabilities                 |
| <u>0</u> Deafness                | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment                 |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness          | <u>37</u> Other Health Impaired                |
| <u>3</u> Developmental Delay     | <u>18</u> Specific Learning Disability         |
| <u>3</u> Emotional Disturbance   | <u>6</u> Speech or Language Impairment         |
| <u>0</u> Hearing Impairment      | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury                |
| <u>0</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>0</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 4
10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to the nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below. If your current staffing structure has shifted due to COVID-19 impacts and you are uncertain or unable to determine FTEs, provide an estimate.

	<b>Number of Staff</b>
Administrators	5
Classroom teachers, including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	10
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	5
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	7
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	0

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 25:1

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

<b>Required Information</b>	2020-2021	2019-2020	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017
Daily student attendance	98%	96%	95%	95%	95%
High school graduation rate	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

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

Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2021.

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

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

Yes  No

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

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

To provide a top quality elementary and middle school education through the lens of arts integration. Through our staff and curriculum, we offer an environment that embraces the natural diversity of learning styles and supports the social, emotional and physical needs of our students.

16. Provide a URL link to or text of the school’s nondiscrimination policy.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bf2f07d89c172a028c71699/t/5f61534ed5f61d2e4a951dc4/1600213839357/Student+Anti-Discrimination+and+Anti+Harassment+Policy+-+January+2020.pdf>

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

Students are selected by lottery and accepted on a first come-first served basis. We do not inquire about IEP or any behavioral issues until after the student has been accepted, and then we work to meet the needs of the incoming students whatever they are.

## **PART III – SCHOOL OVERVIEW**

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The Birches Academy of Academics and Art is a publicly funded chartered public school located in Salem, NH. Open since 2012, we serve 225 students in grades K-8 from over 10 communities in Southern New Hampshire. We welcome families from all walks of life and have parents from many different professions including police officers, doctors, truck drivers, homemakers, computer programmers, engineers, garbage collectors, house cleaners, and bus drivers. Although they come from different backgrounds and socioeconomic strata, the member families of our community work together and maintain respectful cooperation at all times. This was made all the more apparent in recent times as the debate around mask wearing at our school was going on. Even though we had several families who were strongly opposed to wearing masks in the school they wore masks to our meetings and argued respectfully. The dialectic approach that both sides of the issue took is a testament to the cohesive culture of our school.

We encourage students to fulfill their potential in several ways but essentially it reduces to addressing the whole child. We work hard to find something that each child can excel at and then we use their success in that area to encourage growth in other areas. We understand that success builds mastery and so we offer additional opportunities for students to explore their interests whatever they may be.

For instance, students can sign up for after school clubs which are often formed at their suggestion. The students find a teacher who shares their interest or places their idea in the suggestion box, which is read aloud every Thursday at our all-school assembly, and then a club can be organized for an after-school activity. Some examples of after-school clubs are 3d printing, Sewing, Coding, Foreign Language Club, Makerspace, Dungeons and Dragons, Board Games, and Cooking. There are also Art clubs, which add to the Arts integration that is a hallmark of our school.

Regular education teachers work closely with our art teacher so that the work they are doing in one class overlaps and enhances the work done in another. A good example of this came one year when the students in the seventh grade studied refugee populations. At the same time, the art teacher was able to get the seventh graders involved in a project which had them receive pictures of children from a Syrian refugee camp. Our students then used those pictures to paint portraits of the children which we then sent to them. We later received a thank you video of the Syrian children opening their portraits with a message from one of the workers at the camp. He related to our students what a big difference it made to a group of children who felt at the time that no one wanted them or cared about them to receive such gifts. These connections to the world as well as connections to our local populations are another thing that we take pride in at The Birches Academy.

An additional accomplishment that we value is our use of technology. Our teachers have always made good use of technology, but during the COVID pandemic our teachers really rose to the occasion. Our teachers met in professional learning communities (PLCs) and helped each other to master multiple technology tools. We also talked in staff meetings and focused on reaching everyone and utilizing an SAMR approach for technology integration. This approach calls for the teacher to move beyond simple substitution to augmentation, modification and redefinition. The idea is to use technology not just in more ways but in better ways.

A final initiative that we use that sets our school apart is our House System. This adaptation of Positive Behavior Intervention Strategy (PBIS) serves several functions in our school. Because we assign students of each grade to each of the houses we can ensure that there are connections made between the grades, and we are able to lean into this for behavioral as well as educational mentoring. We are also able to leverage the system to award social capital to students who may struggle socially and help them to find "value" to the house collective. This "value" can then be turned into opportunities to create friendships and chances to gain entry into social groups.

In closing, it is synergy that defines our school. The parents, teachers, students and other members of our community are able to accomplish more together than their combined individual talents would suggest. The association and fellowship in our community brings out the best in each of us and allows us to count on each

other. Learning from each other we utilize tools and programs more effectively and there is a sense of belonging for our students that encourages them to take risks.

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

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

#### **1a. Overall approach, which may include overarching philosophy or approaches common across subject areas:**

The overall approach at the Birches Academy of Academics and Art is to meet each student where they are and address the whole child. We do this by using an arts-integrated approach to curriculum which is based on the common core. Teachers use a variety of formative assessments in the classroom in order to plan and adjust instruction as necessary and in grades 3-8 we use the Statewide assessment test(SAS) as our summative assessment.

We utilize a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) model to identify and address students who struggle. For instance, a student in first grade who is struggling with the material might be referred to the Response to Intervention(RTI) instructor where they will receive an extra lesson or clarification of the lesson in addition to the lesson that all students receive in class. The RTI teacher then tracks the progress of the struggling individual and either they are able to overcome their difficulty with the help of the instructor or the student may be referred for special education services using the data generated through the RTI process to support the statement of need.

In order to adapt to online learning, and having some students who chose to attend school remotely during the pandemic, we relied heavily on professional learning communities(PLCs) to leverage the expertise of each teacher as a resource to our teaching group in general. Teachers who were more adept at delivering online lessons, for example, led workshops and taught other teachers how best to deliver online content. Some PLCs dealt specifically with the technology hardware while others dealt with pacing and the need for breaks to be incorporated into the work. Teachers also talked about ways of addressing social and emotional learning needs in and out of the classroom.

#### **1b. Reading/English language arts curriculum content, instruction, and assessment:**

Reading/English language arts (ELA) needs are addressed using the common core standards to create a framework which is then adjusted as necessary to meet student needs. Teachers use several different formative and summative assessment tools to identify areas of concern so that we can adjust instruction. When one, or a few students are identified as struggling with a concept or in general, they may be referred to the RTI Instructor. The RTI instructor will offer the students additional instruction and do more focused assessments to try to identify as closely as possible the area where a student will most benefit from further instruction. When an area of need is found in several students then we make a change on a global or classroom level depending on the scope of the issue. For example, when assessment scores indicated that our students in grades K-3 had issues with reading fluency and accuracy, we instituted the Foundations program because we felt that the results suggested a deficiency in phonemic awareness. To address this deficiency we began using the Foundations program both in class as a tier one intervention and also in our RTI program.

The initial results from our inclusion of Foundations showed growth as measured using dibels scores but there still seemed to be a gap in phonemic segmentation so we added the Heggerty program to bolster the Foundations program. We have seen some promising results, but it is still too early to say with certainty that this pairing of programs will be sufficient. We continue to collect data and will make the necessary changes depending on student needs. The programs we use in our school are either evidence based, research based or both, and all of our teachers and specialists do extensive research before we institute a new program. If the program does not produce results after an agreed upon time then the teachers do more research until they find another program that promises to address the area of need.

In grades four and five, which do not traditionally use Foundations, we also made some changes to address gaps that were uncovered by our assessments. We began using the bookworms program which also works to

increase vocabulary acquisition by helping to build and maintain foundational skills. While we saw some very encouraging results in our students' writing with this program, we were still seeing some gaps in phonics and decoding skills. We are currently researching programs to supplement the bookworms program which will address phonics explicitly at the fourth and fifth grade levels.

In middle school, grades six through eight, we use a weekly grammar assessment to uncover areas of greatest need and then build lessons that address these needs directly. There is also a heavy literature focus at these grades with writing and paragraph construction being important as well as vocabulary and proper note-taking.

### **1c. Mathematics curriculum content, instruction, and assessment:**

Mathematics is addressed in several ways, but as with our other main classes our program begins by aligning instruction with the common core standards. The teachers use various formative and summative assessments in the classroom to identify areas of need and adjust instruction as necessary. One important distinction with how we present mathematics to the students is the emphasis we place on each student developing strategies that work for them. The children are all presented with multiple ways of solving a given problem, particularly at the younger grades, and they are required to demonstrate an understanding of each method. After the initial lessons, however, students are encouraged to utilize the strategy that makes the best sense to them. Teachers may guide students to a different strategy when their chosen strategy doesn't serve them, but the students retain agency in their education and act as partners with their teachers.

Students are also required to engage in metacognitive analysis of their work. Students are asked to not only answer but be able to explain how they came to their answer, and why they chose a particular strategy. This is important because as their work becomes more complex it is increasingly important that they be able to identify weaknesses and strengths in their reasoning. At the younger grades there is also an emphasis on number sense and such concepts as addition makes the answer a bigger number while subtraction produces a smaller number. We also talk about starting with the larger number when adding so that there is less to add on. Teaching these types of strategies explicitly in the lower grades helps the students to form a math schema that they can build onto as they progress in their studies.

We have also made an effort to incorporate technology into our mathematics instruction across the grades. In the younger grades we utilize math games and online programs such as Prodigy to allow students to practice in a way that coincides with their non-scholastic hobbies. In the fifth grade our mathematics program is delivered in a flipped format. Students first watch a video at home and fill out an information sheet while watching. Then they return to class and move through stations explaining the lesson to each other and working through problems. This allows the teacher time to meet with each student individually and gauge their mastery, and it allows students who are struggling at home to watch the videos as often as necessary to help them understand the material.

In the middle school we also utilize technology including an online textbook which allows the teacher to work through the material and allows the students to check their answers when they are working. We refocus at this point on meeting students where they are and offering advanced options to students who are excelling in Math as well as offering additional support to students who struggle.

### **1d. Science curriculum content, instruction, and assessment:**

Science is addressed using the next generation science standards with a variety of formative and summative assessments utilized to determine where our teachers need to focus more strongly due to student need. There is a focus on the scientific method and experimentation particularly so that the students can gain an understanding of the real-world applications of the science curriculum. Every other year we host a "scientific solutions" all-school event that has students identify a problem and generate an invention to solve it. In grades K-3 the emphasis is on describing a problem and coming up with a solution. The project parameters are appropriate for the grade span. In fourth and fifth grade the students are tasked to create a Rube Goldberg machine that solves a problem. In middle school the students create a project that demonstrates understanding of scientific problems and solves a real-world problem or demonstrates a

concept they have learned about.

The pandemic presented a series of roadblocks for all grades, but the science teachers were particularly affected due to the challenge of ensuring each student had access to the same materials when working on a project during remote instruction. In some cases, teachers created a series of choices for students using household items, and in other cases they created science kits which we distributed either having parents come to the school to pick up or by delivering them to the students at home. In addition to the experimentation there is also a strong writing component to the science curriculum which calls for students to engage in writing that describes not only their physical experiment but also their thoughts and reasoning. This component leads to a greater depth of knowledge and exposes areas of weakness and strength that their teachers can address.

### **1e. Social studies/history/civic learning curriculum content, instruction, and assessment:**

The Birches academy addresses social studies, history and civics using cross-curricular explorations that demonstrate to students their connectedness to history and the world. Students study cultures through a celebration of holidays celebrated by those cultures and the history around their celebrations. This is augmented by inclusion of folk songs from different cultures and a study of the art produced by different cultures. Students in music class participate in folk dances so that they can experience the celebration for themselves. Students in the younger grades are given a country of focus and work to create masks during their art classes from that culture's history and educate their peers about the culture. In another example, middle school students study refugees, learning what it means to be a refugee. Then they focus on particular refugee populations from history.

One example of how this process is augmented through a crossover into the art class had our middle school students receive pictures of Syrian refugees. Our students then painted portraits which were sent to Syrian children in their refugee camp. The video of them receiving their portraits was shared with our school community in an assembly and the impact was huge. These types of activities serve to create an understanding in our children that they are not only citizens of the United States but also of the world.

In addition to the cultures of various peoples around the world, our students also study the impact that the land of a people has on its development. Students explore the idea that access to water and other natural resources can shape how a community develops and whether they become an agrarian or hunter-gatherer society, for example. Teachers then connect the type of society to the development of beliefs and compare different peoples throughout history and the world.

### **1f. For secondary schools:**

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

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

At the Birches Academy we take a cross-curricular approach and ensure no subject is taught in isolation. We believe the connections between classes and disciplines creates a more robust education. The art teacher coordinates with the classroom teachers to ensure the work students are focusing on in class is reinforced during art. When middle school students study medieval history in their social studies class they create castles in art class. They have to use and label a specified set of characteristics of a medieval castle such as the portcullis or ramparts and demonstrate an understanding of their importance. Another example, from first grade, has students learning about rivers and the characteristics of different rivers accompanied by pastel drawings with a written component explaining what is illustrated. The written component covers ideas such as fresh versus brackish water, waterfalls or mineral deposits in the rivers.

Physical Education focuses on ensuring that students learn the skills necessary for success in later physical endeavors. In lower grades a physical education class might focus on the component parts of throwing and the older students, through the peer leaders program, will join the class to demonstrate and help monitor the younger students as they learn. In the higher grades there is a stronger focus on nutrition and health habits as well.

All students receive instruction in Spanish and this serves several purposes at the different levels. In lower grades the focus is mainly on helping students learn to listen for different sounds in the language. This is accomplished by students learning the days of the week and other facts through songs and activities. These activities reinforce classroom learning but they also lay a foundation for future language skills by cultivating phonemic and phonological awareness. In higher grades Spanish class is also leveraged to educate students about other world cultures through exploration of music, food and film.

Our school is an arts-integrated school but we also place an emphasis on technology integration. Teachers employ the SAMR methodology to use technology in ways that don't only substitute technology for its analog counterpart but instead work to augment, modify and redefine the way information is provided to students. In kindergarten our students use green screen technology to create weather reports which allow them to feel a part of the information. In first and second grade the students use the See-Saw platform to post their work and collaborate with their teachers. Technology allows students to take reading assessments asynchronously and this allows the teacher to work more formative assessments into the day without breaking the flow of the lessons. Fifth grade delivers their math lessons using a flipped model and middle school students use interactive notebooks designed by the teachers to access their lessons, work through the materials and add their own work to improve the notebooks.

We also offer after-school clubs and programming including robotics, chess, makerspace, cooking and sewing. Additionally, the middle school has an elective program where students can explore their interests which reinforces their agency.

### **3. Academic Supports**

#### **3a. Students performing below grade level:**

Students performing below grade level are addressed in several ways. The chief strategy for helping struggling students in the lower grades is inclusion in our Response to Intervention(RTI) program. Teachers identify struggling students and refer them to the RTI teacher who meets with them in small groups. These groups don't replace the class in which students are struggling but rather augment them. For example, if a student is found to be struggling in reading then that student would be added to an RTI group. The RTI teacher performs a more drilled down set of formative assessments and uses her expertise to teach students to read explicitly, reinforcing the strategies that were taught in class. Students in an RTI group for reading would first receive instruction in reading with their classroom peers and then later they would meet with the RTI teacher for a "second hit" of strategies in a smaller group. Students who progress back to the level of their peers move out of the RTI group until and unless they need to rejoin in the future. For students who do not progress, the RTI process provides the data needed to support referral for special education services.

In the upper grades, students who are identified as underperforming are supported by our group tutoring programs. Students in grades 3-5 are referred by their teachers to the tutoring program. This gives teachers an opportunity to work with struggling students in small groups and offers greater opportunities to identify areas of weakness and strategies to help the student succeed. In middle school we offer a homework club twice a week as well as a student-run tutoring club. There is no charge to students for participation in these clubs and the student tutors work as a service to their fellow community members.

#### **3b. Students performing above grade level:**

Students performing above grade level are addressed in several ways. One way is through the inclusion of enrichment work when they have mastered the material required for a lesson. For example, if a math student demonstrated an understanding of the concepts while their peers are still working on the practice phase, the

excelling student might be given some work that covers real-world applications of the material. This leads to a greater depth of knowledge and enriches the school experience. If a student in fourth grade demonstrates superior command of the English vocabulary material, they might be assigned to study Greek and Latin roots during the time when their peers are learning their essential grade-level vocabulary. These opportunities are focused in nature and address a student who outperforms their peers in a given area at a given time, but there are also students who have a total command of the materials to be covered in class. If a student consistently outperforms their peers, or if they demonstrate a total mastery of the material that is to be covered, then that student can be assigned an alternate learning path. For example, we currently have a fourth grade student who is taking high-school Algebra. He meets with the middle school math teacher independently to receive instruction and meets with the Algebra class one day a week to explore the concepts with the other Algebra students. The remainder of the time he is with his fourth grade peers. Teachers might also tailor a student's curriculum to include greater expectations or more in-depth coverage of material in the classroom. This is ideal for students who learn quickly but still benefit from a deeper look at the information. This enrichment can also include a student acting as a peer tutor or in-class expert.

### **3c. Special education:**

We work to meet the needs of our special education students in several ways, but the guiding principal is leveraging any student's needs to provide better instruction for all. We accomplish this by having our instruction follow the Universal Design for Learning(UDL) model and allowing students to demonstrate understanding through the process that best suits them. UDL calls for teachers to make educational accommodations accessible to all. For example, If one student benefits from access to a multiplication sheet then the teacher would make that accommodation available to anyone who feels that it would help them. In this way we ensure students have access to many accommodations and not just the ones enumerated in their Individual Education Plans (IEP)s. This also allows students with IEPs to retain agency in their education. Specialized instruction occurs in the classroom and pull out, providing in the moment learning and reinforcement of skills.

Our UDL approach helps us to identify students who qualify for special education. Interventions are provided through the RTI specialist and classroom teachers. When a student continues to struggle we can show the interventions that have already been tried. The RTI specialist tracks information which shows progress and precedes the student's exit from RTI, or it can be used to explain the deficiency so the student can receive the appropriate specialized instruction. Specialized instruction is provided by the sending district, but we make space available to the providers and include them in our staff meetings and planning sessions. This creates a positive feedback loop as these providers are the main source for our UDL accommodations.

All students have access to smaller groups, instructions read aloud, and other accommodations depending on the subject. Teachers are flexible with demonstration of skill but do not lower the integrity of the curriculum.

### **3d. English Language Learners, if a special program or intervention is offered:**

To meet the needs of English language learners (ELLs) we utilize a certified ELL teacher. This teacher tests our students and when a student qualifies as an ELL the ELL teacher meets with our regular education teachers to guide them in creating instructional opportunities that will reach the identified students. This is another area where our UDL philosophy comes into play. Many of the practices that are beneficial to ELL students are also useful to students who are not identified as such. Teachers are encouraged throughout the school to utilize realia and connect the material from a given lesson to the backgrounds of as many children from the class as possible. Our celebrations of different cultures and cultural holidays offer an excellent opportunity for helping an ELL student to feel included into the classroom dynamic.

Another strategy that teachers use to reach our ELL students as well as other students in the classroom is the use of pictures. When approaching a new story teachers often hang pictures from different parts of the story around the room or show pictures on the projector so if a student is struggling to keep track of the story they can have a point of reference. Teachers who have pictures posted around the room can also point in

succession as the students work their way through the story to indicate the chronology of events. Our teachers also use frequent formative assessments to gauge student understanding, especially when introducing new material. If a student indicates that they are struggling with the new material either by their performance on an exit ticket or as indicated through a classroom check-in such as "thumbs up, thumbs down," then the teacher can meet with the student individually and seek help from the ELL teacher to make the curriculum more accessible.

**3e. Other populations (e.g., migrant, homeless), if a special program or intervention is offered:**

At the Birches Academy of Academics and Art we do not generally have a migrant population, but the nature of a migrant population would likely qualify them for assistance under the definition of homeless under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. We do set aside monies for homeless students and their families and we have provided gas assistance and grocery assistance in the past. We also work with the sending districts to ensure that our homeless students can continue to access their school of choice during their time as homeless. We have been lucky to have great cooperation from our sending districts and have been able to meet the needs in our population thus far. We also have a list of community resources that our Student Services Liaison can make available to families and students in need.

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

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

At the Birches Academy of Academics and Art we focus heavily on engaging our students and teaching to the whole child. We have several programs which engage students with the school including our house system, weekly Forest Forums, and some online programs. The house system has each student assigned to one of our eight houses. Each house has a different focus. For instance, Hawthorne house has taken on recycling and they meet to discuss ideas and build and decorate recycling boxes for the other houses. These activities were limited during the active time of the pandemic but are now being phased back in. Students are also able to earn house points by engaging in prosocial activities, and teachers can use this system to generate social capital for students who struggle socially.

Students attend Forest Forum and sit with their houses while one class hosts the gathering. They present work from their studies as well as delivering a historical perspective and talking about the trait of the month. Students receive awards once a month for embodying the trait of the month and receive, during the assembly, a magnet for their parents' car as well as a certificate of recognition. Teachers work to recognize each student, but each student really earns their award.

During the pandemic, when we moved to remote instruction, we employed several strategies to keep our students engaged with school and each other. Teachers used zoom and other technology programs to provide instruction to the students and also set time aside for the students to just check in with them. We moved our after-school Dungeons and Dragons game online and continued it through the summer so that the students could maintain connections outside of their home. Other students worked in online groups on projects and the Art teacher in particular assigned projects which allowed the students to explore material that more easily lent itself to a remote platform. For instance, she designed a lesson around forced perspective that had students taking pictures of their pets but because of the forced perspective it looked as if their pets were larger than their houses. We also used online platforms like our community Facebook page to have students check in with each other, share their work and report in on the various ways they were getting exercise as well as sharing other project ideas.

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

The most important partnership the school has is with the Foundation of Birches Academy. The Foundation is composed of community members and parents who fundraise money for the school to help bolster our budget. Because of the funding formula followed in New Hampshire for charter schools, we receive approximately one-half as much money as a traditional public school, and the Foundation helps to cover expenses. We have several other partnerships which support our school community in a variety of ways. Some of these are formal and some are informal and are geared toward building community.

One formal partnership is with the Chamber of Commerce. The other Chamber members brainstorm with us and participate in our fundraisers and professional days. Another formal partnership is with the Charter school alliance which is a group of charter schools working together to track and propose legislation that will allow more students to benefit from the charter experience. We also have a robust designated volunteer program that we draw on to help with field trips and to fill in for recess coverage and other school needs. This serves as a vehicle to get parents more involved in our school. The designated volunteer program calls for volunteers to be vetted and get fingerprint clearance before they can join the program.

One of the more informal programs is "tea with the principal" which happens several times throughout the year and has parents meet with the dean of school to discuss any questions, concerns or ideas that parents want to explore in an informal setting. These talks persisted during the pandemic and actually increased in frequency. This allowed us to keep a sense of connectedness and offered an opportunity to check on our families to see where we could support them and their students. During the pandemic we also organized a driving parade that had all teachers drive to each of our graduating students' house to plant a sign in the yard. At the end of the school year when students were still remote we organized another day where parents and

children could come to the school and drive by to say hello to the teachers who each had a spot in the parking lot. This year we intend to bring back our field day and merge it with our all-school barbecue. Both of these events have been huge community building events in the past.

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

Our school works to create an environment where teachers feel valued and supported in several ways. One strategy that we use to accomplish this is to meet with each teacher to find their areas of interest beyond teaching. Once we have this information we try to match training opportunities to teacher interests and help them to increase their expertise in an area of interest. Where possible we employ a train the trainer approach which allows them to focus on their areas of interest, but it also benefits the school by creating a pool of resident experts who can train their peers. This strategy is aided by our use of professional learning communities (PLCs). Teacher experts come together in PLCs and create different groups depending on what they have to offer their peers and then the remaining teachers attend a given training based on either interest or need. This approach was particularly helpful during the transition to remote learning because some of our teachers who initially struggled with technology were able to learn from peers in a supportive environment and lower their affective filters. The PLC work and initial technology sessions were also aided by the dean of school who has a specialty in Teaching with Technology, but that support was structured to empower teachers to help each other rather than to teach them directly.

In addition to enhanced training in technology for delivering instruction remotely, we were also able to give our teachers access to new equipment which enabled them to maximize their time. For instance, one teacher mounted a camera in her room that allowed her to present a lesson to her students, and she could move the camera remotely to focus on the whiteboard or on materials in her classroom. When we moved from remote to hybrid instruction this technology was easily adapted to allow the in-person cohort to share their project work with their at-home peers. This helped the teacher connect the two cohorts in preparation for a return to full time school and establish classroom procedures. In another instance, we helped a teacher to try out several different technology programs until she found one that allowed her to deliver instruction to students remotely and also gave her access to their work in real time. The teacher expressed feeling validated by the leeway in trying new programs and relief when she found the right one.

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

The Birches Academy of Academics and Art leadership team is comprised of the Dean of School (DOS) and the Dean of Operations (DOO) and uses a collaborative leadership. While the members of the leadership team make final decisions, this is seldom done without seeking input from stakeholder groups and then only when timeliness demands it. There is a secondary tier of administration comprised of the student services coordinator and grade level team leaders. The middle school team meets weekly and the elementary team bi-weekly to discuss concerns that affect their teams and discuss how all-school initiatives will be implemented. The DOS attends grade level meetings. There are all-staff meetings held bi-weekly and led by the DOS. All-staff meetings offer an opportunity to discuss policies.

To foster a collaborative environment and build relationships, the DOS meets with each staff member several times throughout the year to explore how the staff member feels their job is going and to explore other areas where the staff member would like to grow. This helps the DOS determine who to forward opportunities to when they are received. For example, when an email came about a FEMA training around incident command the DOS forwarded the email to a staff member who had expressed interest in cybersecurity and logistics. The staff member was able to attend a training and increase the pool from which the school may draw in times of crisis. These are the kinds of win-win scenarios that leverage teacher fulfillment and align with the goals of the school.

The focus of all procedures and initiatives is child-centered and focuses on student achievement. One fact that makes this possible is the staff's openness to admitting when something doesn't work. Administration consistently pushes the message that when there is a problem with student achievement, it doesn't matter whose fault it is. The importance lies in determining how to fix the problem. Over time, teachers have come to believe this and have become very open about areas of potential growth. Administration also employees

nudging to introduce a new initiative to help with teacher stress about new ideas. For example, during routine walk-throughs the DOS might ask how the teacher is integrating art into a particular lesson so that teachers will understand that this remains a focus but without an initial consequence if they had slipped in their execution. Cumulatively these nudges drive changes in behavior, usually without requiring extra pressure.

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

The Birches Academy of Academics and Art values its students, families and staff and celebrates and supports our diverse stakeholder needs in many ways. Our foundation is built upon inclusiveness and just as our charter indicates, we work to meet each student where they are. This includes where the students are academically but also where they are socially and emotionally. The first thing we do to address diversity is teach our students about the gift of diversity and expose them to different cultures. In the lower grades we do this by including songs, creation myths, and art which celebrate different cultures and their histories. Having a strong arts integration component supports our ability to explore other cultures and this makes students feel more comfortable in sharing their backgrounds.

An example from third grade curriculum has our students study immigration, and as part of this unit students research and share their family stories of arriving in America. Students share with the class stories about their ancestors, their countries of origin, and stories about what life was like there. Students also make dolls that represents an ancestor and they talk about the clothing they would have worn.

Another example is the unit that the middle school students do on refugees. This unit also takes a look at the repercussions of racism and the victimization of people because of their membership in a minority group. While conversations of this type are uncomfortable, they serve several important functions. This year we had conversations about the invasion of Ukraine and were able to support our students of Ukrainian descent as they worked through their anxiety about their relatives who still live there. In past years we have had our middle school students paint portraits of Syrian refugees which allowed conversations about the need to appreciate differences and celebrate diversity. In both of these instances we were able to use tragic events in the world to impress upon students that they are all citizens of the world and that a celebration of diversity rather than a fear of "the other" is important in preserving peace.

We support our students who are members of the LGBTQ+ community and work to ensure that students are free to be themselves in a safe, supportive environment. We meet with students and parents and generate plans so all teachers are aware of the student's needs and can work to support them.

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

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While it is difficult to choose one strategy that makes The Birches Academy of Academics and Art successful, our use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) does stand out among our initiatives. The reason UDL stands above is that it is imbedded in all aspects of our school. With regard to social emotional learning (SEL), one could easily see how the training staff participates in specifically for dealing with troubled or emotionally struggling students is applied across the school and utilized when dealing with any behavioral issues. Students who are referred to the principal, for instance, participate in a life-space interview (LSI) which seeks to help the student accept responsibility for their behavior and generate a plan so that they can avoid future incidents. This is one component of the Crisis Prevention Institute's program for dealing with disruptive or out of control behaviors, but more importantly helps staff to stop issues before they get to the point of being out of control. We apply all of our behavioral management techniques in this fashion and when planning for behavioral programs and interventions, we bring UDL into the planning just as if we were creating a regular education lesson plan.

When we look at how UDL fits in with our instructional practices, we can think again about taking strategies that work for the most needy students and making them available to everyone. UDL goes further than this at our school though. While it is easy to utilize UDL in a reactive fashion such as taking an accommodation from a struggling student's Individualized Education Plan and making it available for all students, we can also take a proactive approach. If we think of UDL principles while designing our lessons, we can avoid the need for many interventions. The key to this is focus. When we are assessing a student in math class to find out if they understand a specific math concept, it is often of benefit to give the entire class access to several math formulas that they might need to complete their work. If the student is not being tested on memorization of formulas then it shouldn't be part of an assessment for them to remember them. These paradigm shifts can manifest in multiple ways and once a teacher begins to include the UDL philosophy in his plans, many applications occur.