

What color is your parachute? "Yellow" students targeted for extra help in Minneapolis Spring Break Academy

Written by Sarah Lahm, TC Daily Planet
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As part of its recently announced short-term intervention strategies, the district will offer a special Spring Break Academy. Host schools for these academies will be selected from among the thirteen sites that have been chosen as "lab schools" for the short-term intervention plan.

Spring Break Academy is not for everyone. Students who are allowed / invited / urged to attend are those who are color-coded as "yellow" according to their test scores. Students are color-coded as red (failing), yellow ("on the bubble" or close to proficiency), green (proficient), or blue (exceeding expectations), according to a teacher familiar with the system.

A district memo describing the Spring Break Academy confirms this account, with a question and answer in the FAQ section:

"Can we invite hard-working red zone students who would really benefit or is this a district-generated list? (Can the list be added to?)

The focus will start on the students scoring in the yellow and then move into the students scoring in the red. (to clarify for principal understanding - only students that qualify for ALC and summer school plus the students that are in the bubble that have been identified for the intervention of the short term strategies.)

The district memo on the Spring Break Academy said that a list of eligible students would be sent to schools by February 19.

The district also identifies which students receive special interventions in the 13 schools targeted for high-impact, short-term interventions during the spring semester of 2014.

The teacher, who asked to remain anonymous, citing fear of retribution by the district for talking to a reporter, said the names on the list that she saw included "green zone" students who may have had an "off year" on their MCA tests. To the teacher, this meant that students who had a dip in their scores will be coached, through the short-term interventions, in order to be sure that their scores go back up into the proficiency category. Students with scores in the yellow zone, who partially meet the standards, are also receiving extra support because, as the teacher described it, these students are often seen as offering the most "bang for your buck."

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The district's Spring Break Academy description heavily emphasizes test preparation, including direction to teach test-taking strategies and to take online MCA sample tests. Enrollment in the Spring Break Academy is limited to grades 3-8, the levels that will be taking the MCAs.

The teacher said she is troubled by the way extra interventions, including the Spring Break Academy, are focused almost exclusively on preparing students for the MCA tests. She objects to a narrow focus on what she called "drill and kill test prep" and said that she fears "speeding up" student will not provide adequate foundational knowledge.

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