

The School Support Team Report

The School Support Team report is an evidence-based report that is written around nine standards or key areas of school functions:

Academic Performance

1. Curriculum
2. Assessment / Evaluation
3. Instruction

Learning Environment

4. School culture
5. Student, family, and community support
6. Professional development and evaluation

Organizational Effectiveness

7. Leadership
8. Organizational structure and resources
9. Comprehensive and effective planning

Each Support Team uses an extensive rubric that identifies indicators for each standard and describes four performance levels. The information gathered from the school review (documents and artifacts, interviews, and observations) is used to complete the report according to the SST rubric.

There are three sections to the School Support Team report.

Section 1 of the SST report is the Executive Summary. This section includes logistical information about the school review, a listing of the nine standards around which the report is written, commendations / areas of note, themes and recommendations, and questions to consider as the school decides how it will follow up on the report.

Section 2, the Detailed Report, describes the team's findings on the indicators for each standard, the sources of evidence used to substantiate the findings, and comments written by the team to clarify their findings. The numbers listed in the performance level column rate the school's overall performance on each indicator of each standard in the rubric.

Section 3 of the report, the Landscape section, provides a "summary at a glance" of the rating results for each indicator. The Performance Level numbers in the Detailed Report are color coded on the Landscape report and indicate the following:

Level 1: Little or no development and implementation (Red on the Landscape section)

Level 2: Limited development or partial implementation (Black on the Landscape section)

Level 3: Fully functioning and operational level of development and implementation (Blue on the Landscape section)

Level 4: Exemplary level of development and implementation (Green on the Landscape section)

CDE SCHOOL SUPPORT TEAM REPORT

LAKE MIDDLE SCHOOL

SECTION 1 - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OCTOBER 12 – 16, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

The school support team conducted a scholastic review of **Lake Middle School** during the period of **October 12, 2009** to **October 16, 2009**.

The school support team activities included a review of the documents collected for the school portfolio and profile, classroom observations (51), Walkthroughs (74) informal interviews and informal discussions with teachers (46), academic coaches (1), students (82), parents (11), professional support staff 7 student teachers 2, central office personnel (1), classified members (23), and the administrators (13 visits). (*Number may represent the number of observations or interviews, not the number of teachers in the school, for example.)

The Standards and Indicators for School Improvement rubric was the primary assessment instrument used during the visit. The team also compiled results from surveys, written documents, and other artifacts. All of these results were considered in the development of this report.

The school support's review report was based upon examination of the documents provided in the school portfolio, team experiences, and observations. The specific findings and recommendations are organized under the headings of Academic Performance, Learning Environment and Organizational Effectiveness. Each of the nine standards for success is addressed in the following pages.

STANDARDS FOR THE SCHOOL SUPPORT TEAM REPORT

Academic Performance:

The following Academic Performance Standards address curriculum, classroom evaluation/assessment, and instruction.

- Standard 1:** The school develops and implements a curriculum that is rigorous, intentional, and aligned to state and local standards.
- Standard 2:** The school utilizes multiple evaluation and assessment strategies to continuously monitor and modify instruction to meet student needs and support proficient student work.
- Standard 3:** The school's instructional program actively engages all students by using effective, varied, and research-based practices to improve student performance.

Learning Environment:

The following Learning Environment Standards address school culture, student family, community support, professional growth, development, and evaluation.

- Standard 4:** The school/district functions as an effective learning community and supports a climate conducive to performance excellence.
- Standard 5:** The school/district works with families and community groups to remove barriers to learning in an effort to meet the intellectual, social, career, and development needs of students.
- Standard 6:** The school/district provides research-based professional development opportunities for staff and implements performance evaluation procedures in order to improve teaching and learning.

Organizational Effectiveness:

The following Organizational Effectiveness Standards address leadership, school structure, resources and comprehensive and effective planning.

- Standard 7:** School/district instructional decisions focus on support for teaching and learning, organizational direction, high performance expectations, creating a learning culture, and developing leadership capacity.
- Standard 8:** The organization of the school/district maximizes use of time, all available space, and other resources to maximize teaching and learning and support high student and staff performance.
- Standard 9:** The school/district develops, implements, and evaluates a comprehensive school improvement plan that communicates a clear purpose, provides direction, and an action plan focused on teaching and learning.

AREAS OF RECOGNITION: The School Support team would like to recognize and commend the following:

- Lake Middle School is a warm and welcoming school. Those who enter are warmly greeted by a friendly office staff.
- The students are open and honest. They smile and laugh in the hallways; many greeted the support team on a daily basis.
- The school has a wealth of external sources that provide services the students who attend here. They benefit from the onsite Health Clinic, can receive a computer from the Techno Program, take home much needed food bags and snacks from Mi Casa, and receive help from the coalition with Metro State. All of this contributes to the sense of community staff and students openly express.
- Students have access to resources throughout the school: large class libraries: a well organized book room; and math and science closets. They further have access to technology throughout the building from computer labs to teachers using “Elmo” for instruction.
- Parents have the opportunity to learn about good nutrition and have access to computers in the basement.
- Staff members are congenial, caring, concerned about students, clearly enjoy and appreciate each other.
- Staff, students, and community often refer to the school as “home”.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIC ACTIONS – MAJOR THEMES

These are significant focus areas that have emerged from the observations and interviews of the school support team. They are intended to guide the school's improvement efforts both for the purpose of the grant and in subsequent years. Please note that themes may include aspects of several rubric standards.

PREFACE

Lake Middle School is a stunning, historic structure reminiscent of castles of old. The massive, wooden doors provide, entry, not only to the school, but, more importantly they provide a portal to infinite possibilities. It should be the charge of every adult in the school to guide every young student on the path of academic success leading to a bright and successful future.

In her book, How it's being Done, Urgent Lessons from Unexpected Schools, Karin Chenoweth says that being considered at risk doesn't mean that you expect less of students -- "just that the adults in the school know they need to intensify their efforts to engage and teach the students."

Students of Lake Middle School come from a variety of situations, they may not arrive at school prepared to learn, but they all arrive at school with a need to learn. It is the right of the students to expect high quality instruction together with high expectations and it is the obligation of the staff to provide both. These students are a generation of bright, enthusiastic, eager, young people who, if given the right education, can and will make a difference in the world. The inverse is as true, if given the inadequate education as other students, their talents may be lost and the future, theirs and others, will not be all it could be.

It is the responsibility of every adult at Lake Middle School to do everything within their power to reach every student every day. Chenoweth states that achievement means, "One hundred percent success, every child, every time." If we expect less we will get less. If we accept less from our students, we do a great disservice.

Reaching this goal is not impossible. High achievement can happen! High expectations can and will make a difference at Lake Middle School. Combining a philosophy of high expectations with a laser-like focus on the essential skills proves a powerful combination. All decisions, all instruction, every day should be based on the question, and "What is best for the students?" This focus will provide the structure for high academic success.

"Richard Wallace, superintendent emeritus of the Pittsburgh school district, coined the phrase 'focus-follow-up-finish' to define what he believes are the determining factors for successful school reform. He notes that the difference between schools and districts that achieve improved performance and those that don't is the ability to intensely focus on one or more aspects of teaching and learning. After a focus has been determined, leaders follow-up with their staff members to ensure that they are continuing to implement an initiative. Finally, districts and schools that succeed at improving their schools have leaders who get to the finish line because they stick to their vision." (Mooney and Mausbach, 2008, 163-64)

The School Support Team has identified three themes to guide your journey to this goal. These themes contain recommendations that lead to necessary changes. Every staff member should examine his or her skills and beliefs in order to provide high quality instruction that guarantees academic success for every young student who walks through the dramatic doors of Lake Middle School.

MAJOR THEMES:

These are significant areas that have emerged from the school report team. They are intended to guide the school's improvement efforts. Please note that themes may cross several standards (e.g. 2,6,9)

1. Leadership and Organizational Systems
2. Success Through Accountability
3. Learning Environment

Major Theme 1: Pillars of Support: Leadership and Organizational Systems

Schools that are successful collaboratively establish the basic core belief of high expectations student academic focus for the staff, students, and parents of the school. They use that belief to build a living mission and vision statement to guide all decisions. In these schools the leader **provides active support** for these belief statements and **demonstrates** that **support** through a strong commitment to continuous student academic improvement. A common element for success is a laser-like focus on the essentials that make the most difference in instruction.

Schools that show continual, sustained academic growth are led by an effective school leader who:

- builds strong staff leaders throughout the building;
- supports a learning environment dedicated to high expectations;
- demonstrates a deep belief that all students can and will succeed;
- is knowledgeable;
- is data-driven;
- is dedicated to the students and staff of the school.

Collins says that in leadership, less is more. Effective leaders, writes Collins, “see what is essential and ignore the rest: He urges us to “focus on what is vital – and to eliminate all of the extraneous distractions...stop doing the senseless things that consume so much time and energy” (from Results Now, Schmoker, M 2006)

The second characteristic of a successful school is an organization of focused, strong, efficient systems throughout the building. These systems must be developed and maintained in a way that incorporate excellent communication and collaboration, providing the essential support for the efforts of staff as well as creating a learning environment conducive to high expectations and results. It is imperative that these systems are analyzed and monitored for effectiveness...keeping only those that purposefully provide essential structure for the school.

A well defined and designed organizational structure serves as a compass to guide the work of the leaders and staff to increased student achievement. Covey (2000) describes this process as setting one's sites towards “true north.” Schmoker (2006) elaborates on the importance of having a keen focus on what matters most in our schools when he states that “improvements result from a new candor that has emerged in education and a willingness to see that historic improvement isn't about ‘reform’ but something much simpler: a tough, honest self-examination of the prevailing culture and practices of public schools, and a dramatic turn toward a singular and straightforward focus on instruction.”

In school reform urgency is required and Lake Middle School is no exception. The students of the school need change now; they cannot afford to wait to see gradual transformation. Change is difficult, but it must begin with strong building leadership who will make positive changes throughout the school. The staff of Lake Middle School is waiting to be led in an optimistic, new direction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure that all school leaders are knowledgeable and supportive of staff and students and that they strive to create and maintain a positive, rigorous, academic environment while hold high expectations for all students. Furthermore, ensure that a systematic organization is prevalent throughout the building creating an efficient academic environment.

- Build leadership capacity through a variety of settings and opportunities (e.g., increased shared decision-making, meeting facilitation, peer observation, coaching, etc.). Furthermore, provide leadership/facilitation training for all interested staff (e.g., Teacher Leadership Certificate, Cognitive Coaching, Critical Friends, and Adaptive Schools.)
- Use an outside facilitator to help staff identify their basic core beliefs about student academic focus and high expectations. Collaborate (e.g., create the mission and vision of Lake Middle School. Plan this activity so that it is completed quickly and use the mission/vision to inform decision making. Include all school personnel to ensure that everyone, (principal, other administrators, teachers, and support personnel) share the core belief and can actively support the mission and vision of Lake Middle School.
- Ensure that all instructional programs are monitored through a well-defined system that includes data team meetings, frequent principal walk-throughs with targeted feedback.
- Collaboratively develop a communication system that ensures all stakeholders are aware of pertinent information in a timely manner. Be sure to include agendas and minutes of all meetings (Leadership, CSC, data teams, etc.)
- Develop a system to monitor scheduled time for data teams, grade level/subject planning, department chairs, etc. Include agendas, shared facilitation, minutes, etc.
- Develop and implement a system that assures budget allocations are aligned with the SIP.
- Establish a system to examine how time is used. Include an analysis of time on task and the ten period schedule. After review, make changes as necessary and continue to collect data to analyze, review, and modify as needed.
- Develop action plans specific to each of the goals stated in the SIP that include timelines and implementation checks.
- Schedule time to review and analyze student data and their impact on instruction.
- Create a building professional development system that allows for differentiation and that is based upon the needs of staff.

Questions to consider:

- How do we prioritize those activities that directly raise student achievement and abandon those that do not?
- How would instruction change if class periods were longer? How would that impact instructional strategies?
- What would change if all teachers collaborated, shared instructional information, created units together, assessed data on these units, and made student achievement a priority? How would higher expectations and greater accountability change instructional strategies?
- How do we know our meetings, professional development, etc. are achieving their designed purpose and have significant effect on student achievement?
- How are we certain that the data we collect gives us the information we need?
- How are we effectively using the data we have?
- How are we building leadership capacity throughout the school and community to reach our goals? How is leadership, at both the teacher and the administrator level, modeled, supported and extended?
- What is the function/purpose of each committee or team and how is that purpose aligned with student achievement?
- How are our goals reflected in the way we use our time, talent and resources?
- What would Lake Middle School look like if EVERY staff member, parent, student truly believed that all students could be successful?
- How do we demonstrate our belief that our students are as capable as any student in Colorado?

Major Theme 2: Success Through Accountability

The care and concern for students at Lake Middle School is demonstrated by the dedicated staff in many ways: long-lasting, mentoring relationships, voluntary academic assistance before, during and after school, clubs, sports, socials, etc. Despite these efforts, the students are not academically successful. Curriculum, timelines, and assessments are in place, progress monitoring is beginning, interventions are provided, but student achievement is not increasing. We respectfully suggest that a different kind of change needs to take place to reap the outcomes so clearly desired by the staff, students and families of Lake Middle School. Brian Pete and Robin Fogarty point out in Closing the Achievement Gap.

“Poverty creates a mindset about the innate abilities, the background experiences, and the apparent willingness of children to learn. This mindset is so firmly in place, it is next to impossible to change it. In fact, the hardest hurdle to overcome in educating the children of poverty is this unshakable belief that they are not as capable as children born to more advantageous circumstances.”

Accountability is the key that can lead to “100% Success, Every Child, Every Time.” Teachers and students alike must hold themselves and each other accountable for striving to reach proficiency and beyond in every endeavor, every day.

Researchers report that the ability to instill in students a belief that they can learn is critical to the success of low-socioeconomic status, effective schools. The underlying components of this factor include a sharp, school-wide emphasis on high achievement, a laser-like focus on what student need to learn, emphasis on all students mastering basic skills, data driven instruction, and personal relationships. (Marzano, 2000) (Chenoweth, 2009).

With this end in mind, we submit the following recommendations and questions to consider, in hopes that they may focus your efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Examine personal and collective beliefs about Lake’s students’ abilities, staff expectations, and what constitutes proficient student work. Commit to instilling in **ALL** students and their families the belief that they can and will learn and achieve at high levels. In order to align your practices with this belief, hold high expectations, step up the level and quality of work students are required to produce in your classrooms.
- Establish a common understanding of standards-based instruction and its correlation to the teaching/learning cycle. Use data to systemically align curriculum, assessment, and instructional strategies across all academic programs.
- Deepen your understanding of assessment for learning – how to use all the data you have to drive instruction in ways that will increase student achievement. Begin to closely analyze the results of classroom, building, district and state-level assessments for the purpose of making adjustments in instruction that will accelerate student achievement.
- Increase the specific feedback given to students as they work toward proficiency in each content area and through each assignment, lesson, or unit of study. Provide descriptive feedback designed to help students reflect on and evaluate their own work, understand and build upon their strengths, and set specific goals for “next step” improvement.
- Develop a richer practice of collaboration to capitalize on each others’ strengths to provide the best instruction for each other and every student.
- Access Colorado Department of Education resources available on-line, such as the Growth Model, the assessment frameworks, the depth of knowledge information, CDE rubrics, CSAP item maps, etc. to support your development in standards-based instruction

Questions to consider:

- What needs to happen so that all teachers have the skills, the support, and the time to meet the specific needs of the students in each class every day and elicit quality work that will lead to proficiency in life?
- How can we ensure all staff members share a common understanding of what standards-based education means in Colorado and looks like in the classroom?
- What research-based instructional strategies that are student-centered, age appropriate for middle school students, and culturally responsive to the needs of the students in this school should all teachers employ?
- How can the school implement those instructional practices that will have the highest impact on student learning? What does active student engagement look like?
- How can teachers use formative assessment data and the analysis of student work to inform their planning, teaching or re-teaching?
- What constitutes rigorous instruction?
- How can we ensure that assessment tasks often extend beyond the traditional “paper and pencil” tests and allow students to exhibit higher order thinking? How can we provide choice for students to demonstrate their learning?
- How do we ensure students receive the most effective and targeted intervention at the earliest possible time? How is the effectiveness of intervention strategies or programs monitored?
- How can we maximize the opportunities to collaborate in planning and/or co-teaching that a middle school schedule affords?
- How do we assure teachers have the skills to understand and administer quality assessments?

Major Theme 3 Themes – Learning Environment

Lake Middle School is a high poverty school that is not achieving high academic performance. This section of the School Support Team (SST) report addresses School Culture, Parent and Community Involvement, and Professional Development and Evaluation.

A school does not become powerful and successful without effective communication and collaboration. That means everyone is working together toward the same purpose, from the School Improvement Plan to targeted instruction in the classroom, with everyone knowing what is going on – what the priorities are, what the purpose of the work is and establishing beliefs that become the non-negotiables by which everyone defines their work. Communication is a tool of collaboration. As the school moves forward, all staff members will need to cultivate trust by intentionally developing their communication and collaboration skills to ensure a constructive culture.

“Without question what schools and teachers do or do not do makes the difference between student success and failure.” (Success in *Sight*, McRel, 2006)

An environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support and personal growth is one which is created by educators as they work together to accomplish what they cannot accomplish alone (Rick DuFour, 1998).

In order to bring about a cultural shift that embraces a sense of urgency, focus and high expectations through full systems engagement, the school staff must plan strategically to shift the culture to one of high performing professionals, fully engaged in standards-based instructional practice. It is urgent that school leaders plan thoughtfully and strategically to coalesce staff around high impact practices that are not evident in the school at this time:

- Use of a guaranteed and viable curriculum
- Define levels of proficiency for the standards
- Assure best first instruction for all students
- Provide ongoing monitoring, feedback and support for staff

“Building a high-achieving culture of effective instruction at any school is a difficult task that resides with the leader, the principal, whose chief role is that of facilitator. He or she must make an honest assessment of the organization – what is working well and what is not. He or she must first begin with morale building by listening to staff and highlighting their positive contributions and then addressing changes that need to occur. The principal must initiate clear communication channels in the school to frame the goal or vision for the work of the school and build consensus toward a course of action. The goal must always be about believing that all students can achieve and then showing teachers how to make that happen with their instruction. (Sustaining Extraordinary Student Achievement, Reksten, 2009)

School Culture

The school’s culture and learning environment has a huge impact on whether these practices can be realized with a high level of effectiveness.

With a safe and orderly climate in place in the building, examination of all facets of the academic press for achievement becomes the highest ongoing priority. A thorough review of current achievement levels of all students and students groups, particularly with regard to grade level, is a starting point for planning. It is clear that students will have to make far more than one year’s progress in one year’s time in order to exit the school at grade level.

The situation is urgent. An immediate response is required. For many staff at Lake Middle School?, much of the present structure and instructional practice will have to be abandoned and replaced with the first best instruction (Response to Intervention strategy) and other research-based current practice. In order to raise cultural expectations of the school, it is important to involve parents for the purpose of removing barriers to learning, and assuring that assessment and monitoring of practices and results are continuously cycling forward. Helping parents create a strong academic foundation that begins at home and that is conducive to continued student learning.

Lake Middle School has teachers in place that demonstrate academic skill and who have built strong relationships with students. Additionally, this community has many of the necessary assets already in place (Denver Health, Mi Casa) to pull together and establish this school as not only a safe, caring place for its students but one that is a beacon of high achievement amidst all of the challenges.

Student, Family and Community Support

Family and Community Support can be powerful elements in the process of building a learning environment which results in high levels of academic achievement for students. The creation of a culture of expectations for the highest quality of instruction and corresponding levels of student performance is basic to genuine partnerships between the school, the families, and the community. Communication of school progress, challenges, and initiatives should be continuous and routine, as well as requests for needed support and involvement. Continue to work on bridging the language and cultural gap between teachers and parents.

Professional Growth and Evaluation

Professional growth of instructional staff members is essential to the process of prioritizing instructional practices and discarding those ineffective practices, and replacing them with powerful research-based practices. Professional development that is job-embedded and relevant to the use of data to drive instruction is essential. To fully support the district initiatives for improvement, the teacher supervision and evaluation plan and practices should connect to the school improvement goals for student learning.

Trust is the cornerstone of a constructive culture. To take on the complex work ahead, this school must develop a culture of trust and respect that permits openness, ability to share ideas, and to be accepting of different approaches and teaching styles. Vertical trust, which is trust between building leadership and staff members is imperative! It takes everyone trusting everyone, working as a single team, supporting efforts, reinforcing practices, and taking risks to make a change.

Currently there is a culture of low expectations of students. The use of excuses as to why students cannot achieve must be eliminated. It is imperative that staff move beyond a focus on family circumstances, poverty or lack of skills and knowledge obtained from previous school experiences. The reality is that every child that walks in the door has strong native intelligence and natural abilities. The culture needs to move to one of high expectations through best first instruction, high accountability and instilling in each student the belief that he or she can accomplish much.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- To build and sustain a culture of high expectations requires building leadership and staff to build collaboration structures. Working in high poverty schools is difficult and challenging work. No one person has the answer but collectively much can be accomplished.
- High levels of academic achievement can only be accomplished by focusing the work to a few high impact strategies. At this time there are too many initiatives occurring within the school. Reexamine the connection or lack of connections and loss of focus by the many innovations that are going on at the same time. Some examples of the many initiatives occurring at Lake Middle School are: the International Baccalaureate Program (IB), the Denver Plan, Positive Behavior Plan (PBS), and Response to Intervention (RtI) to name a few. While all of these programs are laudable, a connection, and alignment along with a scaffolding of initiatives and blending of the ideas together in an understandable plan is imperative.
- Embedded and ongoing focused staff development that everyone practices and that becomes a focal point of all instruction in the school is important. To make the connections a strong, focused, and ongoing staff development plan is important. To make a strong plan for the current school year and beyond, an assessment of a base of knowledge and an understanding of the purpose of initiative is the logical starting point. Staff development needs to be embedded and ongoing throughout the school year and extend over multiple years. It is also critical that all staff development contain an evaluation structure to ensure that what is expected to be learned, is learned and that implementation is done with fidelity with coaching, feedback and collaboration.
- In order to build a culture of high expectations there must be an examination of the behavioral expectations within the school. It is a current common belief that there are high levels of discipline disruptions in the school that interfere with instruction. One of the current methods of dealing with discipline results in high rates of suspensions. In reality this is counterintuitive to obtaining high levels of learning. It is not possible for students to learn if they are not present. The first step in holding students accountable for learning is to involve the students in their own education, to set structures where students can measure their own growth against their own goals. Secondly, it is important to examine if there is a connection between behavioral issues and a lack of effective instructional methods that engage students. Lastly, consider about reinstating the In-School Suspension program where students can be monitored to ensure they are still engaged in learning activities.
- Expand the current Parent Resource Center. Engage with parents and emphasize the culture of high expectations throughout the parent community.
- Summer School. Expectations that student continue with summer school they reach grade level proficiency.

Questions to consider:

- What do high expectations look like for us?
- What is our vision of where student achievement will be in five year?
- What do we believe about all students' ability to learn at high levels?
- What actions or behaviors will we exhibit that demonstrate the belief that all students can achieve at high levels despite the challenge of poverty?
- How can we instill an internal pride and belief in our students that they can achieve?
- What do effective, successful schools with similar demographics do to achieve high levels of success?
- What well-defined professional development is essential for our staff to embed highly-effective instruction in every classroom?
- What professional development can we build on and sustain over multiple years?
- How can we differentiate training to meet the varying needs of staff members?
- What can we do to make learning and success more visible in our school?
- How can we maximize the use of instructional time?
- How can we implement our behavior expectations to ensure consistent implementation?
- How do we align support program with the needs of the students?
- How can we further actively involve parents, community members and business partners in meaningful activities that support student learning?
- How can we expand our communication with parents and the community to guarantee all stakeholders receive necessary information to raise student achievement?
- How do we evaluate our connections with parents and the community?
- How do we stay focused on the goals in the School Improvement Plan and not bring in unrelated professional development?
- How does our professional development effort provide us with focus, depth and sustained growth?
- How do we hold ourselves and each other accountable for implementing what has been learned?

IN CONCLUSION:

The School Support Team sincerely hopes that this report assists the Lake Middle School community in the goal of raising academic achievement for all students. We have strived to help the school community focus its time, energy and resources in the areas and ways that research says will get the best results in student academic achievement. True equity demands no less.

More resources about the nine standards used in this report are available at the Professional Development and School Support website: <http://www.cde.state.co.us/FedPrograms/PDSP/index.asp>

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