



## **QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO ACADEMIC PLACEMENT AT COLUMBIA HIGH SCHOOL**

### ***What changes are proposed for Columbia High School?***

Columbia High School (CHS) has a record of preparing a large proportion of its students for postsecondary success. An increasing proportion of its graduates are accepted at competitive colleges. Given these successes, we propose to maintain most of the current placement structure at CHS. Our proposal recommends reducing the number of levels in social studies, ninth grade biology, and English Language Arts (ELA) electives only. We recommend adjusting criteria for academic placement in ELA to ensure that students who demonstrate proficiency are placed accordingly. In addition, we propose to increase support for English Language Learners and for students who are struggling academically through reconfigured offerings in ELA and Social Studies.

It is an overall expectation that, as elementary and middle school improvements lead to increasingly well-prepared students entering CHS, more students will be placed into honors and Advanced to Advanced Placement (AP) courses. There are no proposed changes to any other subjects and no proposed changes to AP offerings or to entrance criteria for AP classes.

### ***Why do you propose these changes?***

Our school district has analyzed long-term outcomes for our graduates as they go to college and enter the workforce. Students who do challenging, honors-level work in middle and high school have a better chance of getting into a competitive college and are more likely to graduate college and move on to a successful career. It is imperative that we prepare students to succeed in entry-level college coursework without remediation. Thus, we are committing ourselves to what the National Association for Secondary School Principals calls "the core belief that each student should be challenged to achieve at high levels." We believe that, as students have access to higher level classes, we will reduce academic disparities that exist between and among cohorts of students, and increase the percentages of students scoring in the advanced proficient range.

### ***What is the update for the CHS Strategic Plan 2011-2012 Implementation? How do these changes fit into the 2012-2013 CHS Strategic Plan?***

The CHS Strategic Plan builds upon the Middle States Accreditation Process and has focused our educational goals and objectives in a way that positions students for greater access to academic opportunities. Thus far, the high school has been successful in the following areas of implementation:

- Observations and evaluations
- Administrative walkthroughs
- Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)
- Faculty meetings that are moving toward an instructional focus
- Multi-Level Pilot Program
- Increased minority enrollment in higher level classes and AP classes
- MAC Scholars' Program
- Administration of the PSAT for 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders

At the end of the 2011-12 school year, we will evaluate progress and ensure that any changes to the strategic plan are in alignment with the proposed level recommendations, if approved.

***What is the District doing to align curriculum with Core Content requirements and to develop additional challenging learning opportunities?***

The Common Core is a national set of standards, which 45 states have opted into. Common Core replaces the NJ State Standards and requires more integration of subjects, for example more non-fiction in ELA, and more ELA across science and social studies. Work is already underway on curriculum adjustments and more integration of subjects to align with the Common Core for grades K-12. Each department is working on curriculum redesign, best practices, and alignment to the core curriculum. In addition, content supervisors continually seek to expand challenging work, including identifying supplemental readings, and encouraging participation in extension activities such as the annual science fair, the science league, and the robotics contest. The Common Core is a significant change from prior content standards in force in New Jersey and other states since the mid-1990s. The old standards placed an emphasis on a broad array of knowledge and competencies. The Common Core favors more depth – prompting students to ponder, to explore, to frame their own problems and then answer them through self-initiated research. The emphasis shifts from memorizing a large body of knowledge to learning how to synthesize and apply knowledge in the face of unfamiliar problems.

***What are you doing to ensure consistency of rigor and expectations?***

District assessments continue to reflect a rigorous expectation for student achievement. High school administrators conduct walkthroughs and observations in each of the content areas and provide immediate feedback to the supervisors, teachers, and departments, particularly regarding high expectations. Standardized test scores (HSPA, PSAT) continue to measure growth in literacy and numeracy, with the expectation that our students demonstrate not only content mastery, but also applied skills and critical thinking about the disciplines being taught. Monitoring the achievement of goals and objectives in Level 4 classes includes multiple types of assessments, reviewing quarterly grades, mid-year/final exams, final grades, review of college acceptances, etc.

***What are you doing to support teachers as they strive to meet the needs of a wide range of learners?***

Tuesday meeting time, all-day grade level meetings, and class visits are used to identify exemplars of strong lesson design, to observe classroom instruction, and to collaborate on reviewing and developing strong lessons. Content supervisors meet with their staff twice a month, at which time teachers are engaged in collaborative conversations and work concerning curriculum and instruction. This includes review of resources, data analysis, sharing of best practices, examination and discussion of research-based and content-based literature, and curriculum development. Teachers have two full professional development days built into the school year, and periodic in-service training. In addition, our new Teachers' Roundtable meets twice a year to support all non-tenured teachers.

***Will elective courses be labeled Honors and the grades weighted accordingly?***

The expectation for every course identified as "honors," including English and Social Studies electives, is that the classes will be taught, graded, coded, and weighted at the honors level.

***What support will be provided to help greater numbers of students be successful at the honors level?***

We will continue to provide supports to students at all levels, including through:

- Supplemental classes
- Extended use of tutorial labs
- Use of the conference periods for personalized support
- After-school lab
- Summer Step-up programs in Biology, English, and Social Studies
- Bridge to Success Program
- One-to-one tutors
- MAC Scholars

In addition, we encourage teachers to build relationships with students, to partner with their students' families, and to make other recommendations in supportive areas.

***How will placement decisions be made?***

The high school administration and content supervisors will continue to examine criteria and to place students in appropriate classroom environments, where they can and will experience success. In the past two years, we have personalized the process by which students select their classes for the upcoming year. Counselors meet with small groups of students, and/or with individual students.

***If the recommendations are passed, CHS students currently assigned to levels 2 and 3, and their parents, need to be informed about the changes, the heightened expectations, and the importance of participating in the more demanding classes. Will a formal process for this be developed?***

The high school plans to develop a "Parents' Guide" that will outline the academic changes and expectations for students that will be implemented. With an emphasis on "student engagement," families will be informed of the higher expectations that will lead to student success, as well as the resources that are available for them to support their child's success. The communications plan will be developed during the remainder of the current school year, mailed to families during the summer, and discussed with parents during venues, such as Back to School Night, guidance grade level meetings, MAC Scholars' meetings, etc.

***What professional development is being offered to high school teachers around these changes, particularly in regard to differentiated instruction?***

We provide our teachers with regular professional development opportunities throughout the year, led by both internal and external presenters, which include strategies for differentiated instruction. In addition, teachers in each Professional Learning Community (PLC) share best practices with each other. Differentiated instruction is a "best practice" nationally. It is the standard across the country, and the expectation for all teachers.

***How does the Guidance Department plan to effectively communicate the change in the CHS profile with college admissions offices?***

The high school guidance department is already in communication with both state and county roundtables in order to further define and develop the high school profile for colleges. It is particularly important that colleges understand how we define weighted and non-weighted grade distributions. We are confident that the guidance department will continue to produce transcripts that support our students in the college application process by accurately reflecting their academic performance and our rigorous curricula.

***What is the Literacy Strategies through World History course?***

The Literacy Strategies course will provide students who are partially proficient in NJASK (and just above) with a curriculum that meets state standards for World History and focuses on developing in students the reading and writing skills necessary to be successful in adhering to the pace of the scope/sequence of the course and in the HSPA.

***How will the double period affect a student's schedule options?***

English with double period and English plus supplemental act like singleton classes. They may present some limitations but will not prohibit students from selecting elective courses of their choice. "Double period" means two periods back to back; English plus supplemental is also two periods, but they may not be back to back.

***Why is the approach to restructuring biology different than for ELA and Social Studies?***

Over the last 10 years we have increased the percentage of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students taking honors biology from 35% to around 50%. With the addition of a summer step up class for rising 9<sup>th</sup> graders, we expect that as many as 55% to 60% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders will be in honors biology in 2012-2013. As the middle school program moves forward in future years, the science department aims to continue to raise those percentages.

Realistically, not all incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders are prepared to succeed at the honors level. We are therefore leveling up students who would previously have been assigned to level 2 biology into a grade level biology class, taught at the current level 3, to provide these students with a solid foundation in biology.

***If 55% - 60% of students are anticipated to be in honors biology in 2012-2013, how will you ensure that it is still being taught at the honors level?***

While the Step Up Program will help additional students qualify for honors biology, we have not changed the criteria for entrance into honors biology so there should be no question about level of rigor or success. Careful monitoring of student work, especially common assessments, should assure that the honors level is being maintained.

***Will 10<sup>th</sup> grade physics placement be based on performance in Biology and math, or primarily math?***

Placement in 10<sup>th</sup> grade physics will be based primarily on 9<sup>th</sup> grade performance in math, since physics is so math dependent.

***What is your vision for the end-state academic placement structure at Columbia High School?***

These proposals represent the changes we believe to be necessary to improve outcomes for all of our students. The hope is, of course, that the work to raise the bar at the elementary and middle school levels, and to provide more support to help position all students for success, will result in an ever increasing number of students meeting the criteria for higher level work in the high school.

***How does the Middle Years Programme of the International Baccalaureate (MYP/IB) proposed for the middle schools carry forward/integrate with our high school curriculum?***

We will evaluate the implementation of MYP in grades 6-8 and determine by the end of 2013-14 whether to recommend that the Middle Years Programme remain a 3 year program in the middle schools, or that it extend through 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades as a 5 year program. Deciding this two years before the first class of MYP students would become 9<sup>th</sup> graders will provide sufficient time for key Columbia High School staff to be trained and for CHS curriculum to be aligned to IB standards.

If MYP is extended through 10<sup>th</sup> grade, we would need to decide by the end of the 2014-15 school year whether or not to recommend extending to the IB Diploma Programme for 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. If we extend IB into the Diploma Programme, we envision that as an option which students could choose, in addition to our wide array of AP offerings.

***If the IB MYP is expanded through 10th grade, would this be an optional path, or would it be in place of AP in 10th grade?***

We are not in favor of diminishing or supplanting any AP courses. If IB MYP were to be extended to 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, we would still have AP US history starting in grade 10.

***If IB is extended into the high school, will IB replace our current AP offerings?***

We fully support AP and cannot envision a scenario in which the IB Diploma Programme would replace AP. SOMSD has worked hard to increase access to AP coursework and still maintain our high pass rate. We plan to continue to build our AP courses, not diminish them.