



Equitable Excellence: Freshman Curriculum Restructuring Frequently Asked Questions

October 13, 2021

The priorities of the district's strategic plan include increasing access to rigorous curriculum and eliminating race, socioeconomic status, and other social factors as predictors of student success. In 2022-2023, to increase access to rigorous coursework for all students, the high school will eliminate college-prep and honors level classes for freshman English, science, history, and world languages, replacing them with a single, rigorous, high-level curriculum for all.

How did you reach the conclusion that detracking was needed at OPRF High School?

After developing a new curriculum evaluation process in 2017-2018, administrators launched a comprehensive review of our freshman curriculum during 2018-2019. This included looking at data on PSAT scores, course selections, and grades, as well as holding student focus groups. The data confirmed what we've long known: that a disproportionate number of Black and Brown students take college prep courses while a disproportionate number of students in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes are white.

Student focus group data showed that students in college prep courses are less likely to report feeling challenged than their peers in honors classes. The data also showed that this difference is *not* based on ability and that many students in college prep classes demonstrate the potential to be successful in higher-level classes. Several key points:

- About 80% of our students meet or exceed the PSAT benchmarks, but only 50% of our students take honors courses.
- About 70% of our college prep students have PSAT scores that fall *within the same range* as 95% of our honors students.
- Contrary to widely held perceptions, not all honors-level students show greater academic ability: 20% of them fall below the 50th percentile on our reading assessment--and they're primarily white students.

Clearly, based on this data, we have not been providing enough opportunities for our students--specifically our Black and Brown students--to achieve at the level of which they are capable. All students deserve the opportunity to explore and determine their interests and abilities free of labels and tracks. As a school, we must be responsible for restructuring our system so that students can think differently about themselves and about their abilities and potential for success.

So why don't you just encourage more Black and Brown students in college-prep classes to take higher level courses?

The answer to this is complex. First, the history of public education in the United States continues to exert an enormous influence on the structure of today's schools. Sorting and grouping students in academic settings began as a response to the influx of immigrants entering the country during the Industrial Revolution. Though the practice was intended as a way to socialize newcomers, it evolved into the marginalization of non-white and poor communities into so-called "separate but equal" educational settings. The development of IQ tests in the 1900s only reinforced this practice.

The landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954, which found that separate was not at all equal, dismantled large-scale tracking, only to be replaced by tracking at the classroom level with course levels such as remedial (with a disproportionate number of Black and Brown students) and honors (with a disproportionate number of white students). Almost 70 years later, the institutional practice of tracking students into course levels persists despite widely acknowledged evidence of the inequity it creates, and Oak Park and River Forest High School has not been an exception.

Second, the idea of student choice wrongly puts the onus for reforming this system on students rather than where it belongs: on educators. For instance, research has found that male students of color chose not to participate in honors classes because it just wasn't worth the risk. They perceived that teachers would have lower expectations of them, that their peers would ostracize them, and that they didn't have the ability to do well and fit in. As one researcher put it, "Rather than help students feel more comfortable about themselves, the tracking process seems to foster *lowered* self-esteem among those teenagers."

As a school, we have a moral imperative to dismantle the underlying beliefs and structures that hinder access to high-level curriculum, particularly for our students of color.

What does research show about detracking?

Considerable educational research supports detracking. Among the most notable studies:

- A meta-analysis of 15 studies found that detracking consistently showed positive effects on low-ability student achievement with no measurable effects on average- to high-ability student achievement.*
- A longitudinal study on providing accelerated mathematics curriculum to all 8th graders in a diverse suburban school district found that the performance of high-achieving students showed no statistical difference when compared to their previous homogeneously grouped classes. Additionally, scores on placement and Advanced Placement tests improved over time.**
- An analysis of different tracking arrangements in 20 international institutions suggests tracking is linked to lower overall performance and an increase in inequity.***

**"Four Decades of Research on the Effects of Detracking Reform: Where Do We Stand? A Systematic Review of the Evidence," by Ning Rui, Journal of Evidence-Based Medicine, 2009.*

***"Accelerating Mathematics Achievement Using Heterogeneous Grouping," by Carol Corbett Burris, Jay P. Heubert, and Henry M. Levin, American Educational Research Journal, Spring 2006.*

****"Does Educational Tracking Affect Performance and Inequality? Differences-in-Differences Evidence Across Countries." by Eric A. Hanushek and Ludger Wößmann, National Bureau of Economic Research, February 2005.*

What exactly will this change look like?

Beginning with the 2022-2023 school year, freshmen will no longer be separated into class levels of college prep or honors for English, history, science, and world language. Instead, freshmen will have one, rigorous, high-level curriculum in all of these subjects.

Will you still have honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes?

Yes. The restructuring affects only the freshman curriculum. We are not eliminating honors or AP classes for grades 10-12. In fact, by supporting success with the freshman year honors curriculum, we believe *more* students will go on to honors and AP classes in subsequent years, and part of our plan is to increase the number of AP classes in the future.

Won't this hurt students who would normally be placed in honors classes?

The research predominantly shows that when implemented carefully, there are no negative effects on high-level students. The time we have taken to carefully roll this out, coupled with the expertise of our teaching staff, will help to ensure that our highest achieving student can continue to thrive.

Won't you have to water down the curriculum?

No—just the opposite. As part of this restructuring, the freshman core courses have been even better aligned to relevant learning standards and will provide honors-level content. So rather than presume a student can't handle an honors curriculum and assign them to a lower level, every student in those classes will begin with a clean slate, high expectations, and the support they need to be successful.

Won't the pace be too slow for the smartest kids? And too fast for others?

Based on the data from our current honors classes, no. As we noted above, 20% of honors students currently fall *below* the 50th percentile on our reading assessment. Teachers are already differentiating their instruction to ensure that students with a broad spectrum of abilities are succeeding. In addition, we will maintain the pace for all learners through an enrichment period so all students get what they need to access the curriculum. These enrichment opportunities may consist of but are not limited to personalized learning, extension activities, support/tutoring, and extra time to complete work.

How are you planning for this change?

This has been a carefully thought out, five-year process leading up to the launch in fall 2022. The process has included curriculum-writing teams in each of the core subjects; community-engagement sessions; working with a consultant on differentiated instruction and instructional coaching; action research, where newly developed

honors-level units were taught and assessed in both honors and college-prep classes; inclusion of culturally responsive teaching and learning standards in the curriculum; and development of a long-term professional development plan, which focuses on integrating assessment, restorative environment, and technology under the umbrella of culturally responsive teaching.

What support will you give students?

Class size, among many other factors, impacts teacher effectiveness and student success. As we prepare to restructure our freshman experience, lower class sizes will be critical to the overall success. The recommendation is to maintain class sizes of 24 for all courses in the detracked freshman classes. This allows for better community building, where students genuinely have a voice in determining their own learning and teachers can monitor student achievement and provide more personalized learning opportunities.

In addition, incorporating intentional and targeted time for students to enrich their learning in meaningful ways is central to equitable excellence. Administrators are exploring ways to build additional learning opportunities for all students into the school day. These enrichment opportunities may consist of but are not limited to personalized learning, extension activities, support/tutoring, and extra time to complete work.

How can I learn more?

In November 2021 we are planning to hold a series of virtual informational sessions for 8th grade parents and guardians from each of our three middle schools. We'll be sending detailed information to the middle schools soon.