



Justification for the Restructuring of Honors Classes in Grade 8

Updated June 4, 2023 with FAQs

In the 2023-2024 school year, the WWRSD will continue a multi-year plan to eliminate honors classes in Grade 8 now that those students are housed in the middle school. It is understood this plan has been the subject of some public criticism, and we sincerely appreciate the parental input received on this topic.

Please know there is ***no intention*** to eventually phase out Math 7 Accelerated or Algebra 8. It is important to note these are ***accelerated courses, not honors courses***. That is a notable distinction because they cover more than one year of math content. Completing Algebra I in middle school enables a student to enroll in Geometry in Grade 9, thereby accelerating through a grade level of math and opening up the possibility of taking AP courses in high school.

Unlike math, the honors English, Social Studies and World Language classes ***do not*** enable a student to accelerate through content. ***Our plan is to implement the existing honors curricula in the regular Grade 8 classes***. Therefore, our honors students will be exposed to the same content and skills, just not in a class that is labeled honors. This will have no negative impact on these students, as evidenced by the research that will be cited below. ***The student experience will be the same***.

A Deep Dive into our Practices

In examining our honors enrollment this year, we identified some concerns with our practices. Namely, there is a discrepancy between the male to female ratio. For example, English 8 Accelerated contains only 32% males, and Social Studies 8 Honors consists of only 34% males. This caught our attention, and resulted in a deep dive into the criteria. We identified concerns regarding our rubrics as well, as they tend to favor the compliant and organized student, which is not always indicative of an honors-level student. Moreover, the attrition rate between Grade 8 honors classes and Grade 9 honors classes is worrisome. There were 53 students in English 8 Accelerated in 2021-2022, while only 42 are enrolled in English I Honors this year. Likewise, 52 students were enrolled in Social Studies 8 Accelerated last year, while 42 are in World History 9 Honors this year. Honors classes are for high school, and we do not want our students to be prematurely “weeded out” in middle school.

The Nature of our Honors Classes

We utilize The Workshop Model in our ELA classes, which is based on individual developmental levels. Gone are the days of whole class novels. Students now self-select reading material that is of interest and appropriate for their reading level. Our higher achieving students choose more complex texts and tend to read at a high volume. This applies to our Social Studies classes as well. The ability to do so will remain in our new structure. Our valued and experienced teachers are well equipped to meet the needs of our students. Through the use of effective formative assessments, teachers will differentiate their instruction according to student ability and use the standards to progress student learning.

The Difference Between Honors and Gifted

There is a difference between an honors student and a gifted student. The United States Department of Education cites the fact that only 3-5% of the population is gifted. There are 214 students in our current Grade 7, so that means roughly 11 are identified with that label. Our gifted students are served through our Gifted and Talented programming, which is getting an overhaul this summer.

Therefore, we are restructuring the way we serve our higher achieving students by transitioning to within-class ability grouping rather than honors classes for the reasons outlined above. Please know this is a well-thought-out plan on our part, and we have done our due diligence by examining our in-house data and the research conducted by experts in the field. We effectively serve our K-7 students through this model, and we are confident that next year's Grade 8 students will have a challenging educational experience as well.

Research Overview

The findings of our analysis may lead some to wonder why we are not willing to keep honors and just improve the entrance criteria. The answer to this question lies in the research on the topic. ***If the research showed honors courses were effective in the middle grades, they would be the norm in Bergen County, not the exception.*** Granted, homogeneous grouping has been a controversial topic in education for years, and the research on it is mixed. Here is a sample of the research that supports within-class ability grouping:

Example #1

Murphy et. al. explored the difference between homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping on students' text-based discussion and comprehension, which is the core of ELA and Social Studies skills. They found "heterogeneously grouped students exhibited larger gains than homogeneously grouped students."

Murphy, P. K., Greene, J. A., Firetto, C. M., Li, M., Lobczowski, N. G., Duke, R. F., Wei, L., & Croninger, R. M. V. (2017). Exploring the influence of homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping on students' text-based discussions and comprehension. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 51, 336-355. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2017.09.003>.

Example #2

One study reviewed results of 29 studies on the effects of ability grouping in secondary (grades 7–12) schools. The effects of ability grouping on achievement were found to be nonexistent or trivial across all studies.

Slavin, R. E. (1990). Achievement effects of ability grouping in secondary schools: A best-evidence synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*, 60(3), 471–499.

Example #3

In a study by Steenbergen-Hu, Saiying, et al., within-class ability grouping, which is what we are planning, showed effects that were “positive and statistically significant.”

Steenbergen-Hu, Saiying, et al. “What One Hundred Years of Research Says About the Effects of Ability Grouping and Acceleration on K-12 Students’ Academic Achievement: Findings of Two Second-Order Meta-Analyses.” *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 86, no. 4, 2016, pp. 849–99. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44668238>. Accessed 27 May 2023.

Example #4

Puzio and Colby studied the effects of within-class grouping on reading achievement, and they determined the practice is effective.

Puzio, Kelly and Glenn T. Colby. “The Effects of within Class Grouping on Reading Achievement: A Meta-Analytic Synthesis.” *Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness* (2010): n. Pag.

FAQs***Why wasn’t this change better communicated?***

The continuation of the restructuring plan was discussed with the BoE’s Curriculum Committee at their March 14 meeting, which is typically the time of year that courses for the following school year are discussed. Dr. Mortimer started her medical leave on April 1, and unfortunately the plan was not effectively communicated with our parents. For that, we take full responsibility, and we apologize. Dr. Mortimer prides herself on her communication skills and the transparency she has demonstrated, and she regrets the fact that a plan was not in place for others to advise our parents. Considering her track record, she hopes for forgiveness.

Are you sure the statistics you cite about the male enrollment in 8th grade honors classes are accurate?

Genesis indicates there are 11 males and 13 females in one ELA 8 Accelerated class and four males and 19 females in the other class. Therefore, there are 47 students in ELA 8 Accelerated. Thirty-two percent (15) of them are male.

How will teachers handle the needed differentiation?

Feedback from the Strategic Planning process indicates a desire to increase student achievement and rigor. That being said, the ELA 8 Accelerated curriculum, Spanish 8 Accelerated, and the Social Studies 8 Accelerated curriculum ***will be the new curriculum for the entire grade*** starting in the 2023-2024 school year. That is what we mean when we say the student experience for the honors students will be the same. Keep in mind our teachers skillfully differentiate the curricula in grades 6 and 7 without difficulty. Students will be exposed to the same Grade 8 knowledge and skills, yet their reading material will differ. Summer curriculum work time is being provided to the appropriate teachers so that they are ready for September

What are the metrics for success for this change?

As mentioned above, we note a difference in gender when it comes to enrollment in our honors classes. We are hoping to see increased male participation in English I Honors and World History Honors in Grade 9. We would also like to see three sections of Honors ELA and Social Studies in Grade 9 instead of the two we currently have. Grade 10 supports three sections, so there is no reason we cannot have the same in Grade 9.

Moreover, Science 8 Accelerated was discontinued this school year. Next year's enrollment in CP Physics Enriched, a Grade 9 Science class, is just about identical to this year's count. Therefore, our Grade 9 honors students are being appropriately identified even without having an honors-level class in Grade 8.

Isn't it better for high achieving students to be placed in the same class together?

The research on this suggestion is inconclusive on an elementary (K-8) level. As mentioned above, we have a G&T program to meet the needs of our truly gifted learners, which represents about six-percent of our student population.

As a point of comparison, our students who take the regular class, not honors, are getting just about the same grades as our honors students. Consider the data on these charts:

Grade 8 English Sections and MP 4 Averages

Regular or Honors	Average
Honors	93
Honors	97
Regular	84
Regular	79
Regular	81
Regular	92
Regular	94
Regular	96
Regular	95
Regular	97

Grade 8 Social Studies Sections and MP 4 Averages

Regular or Honors	Average
Honors	90
Honors	95
Regular	92
Regular	87
Regular	94
Regular	96
Regular	87
Regular	85
Regular	85

Won't this hurt my child's chances when applying to college?

No. Only a high school transcript is sent to colleges. As a point of comparison, years ago Northern Highlands Regional High School discontinued English 9 Honors, and they have not retreated from that decision. All students just take English 9. If it is successful on a freshmen level in a high-achieving district, it will be successful in our eighth grade.