

June 27, 2005

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I am writing to you in response to several emails and letters that I have received regarding Sherman's schedule and course offerings for next year. Many of you have expressed concerns that changes in Sherman's exploratory classes may not prepare Sherman's students for some of the academic and elective courses at East High School. I want to share my thoughts with you about the proposed changes after reviewing the issues with Ann Yehle, the Principal of Sherman and Valencia Douglas the Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Schools.

In general, each of our middle schools has evolved in very different ways based on its perceived and real needs. The middle schools use the document titled "Common Expectations for All Middle Schools" to guide their design decisions. This document provides general guidelines for the curriculum, schedule and philosophy in our middle schools and allows for considerable flexibility in addressing each of these areas. This document has served the district well, but it is now becoming clear that as budget reductions are occurring, the choices that each middle school must make have to be done in a way that preserves a core set of standards. To that end, we will revisit this document again, beginning this summer, and address each of the areas in the document to ensure that our middle schools are consistent in the courses offered to each student. In other words, we want all of our middle schools students

- prepared to enter high school ready to take on the rigors of high school academics,
- to have the same academic and exploratory opportunities regardless of the middle school they attend.
- to attend heterogeneous classrooms whenever possible that address individual student's needs.

There appear to be three issues that have created the current controversy at Sherman 1) the number of students selected for the Algebra 1 class, 2) the amount of time available for students to take a foreign language, and 3) the conflict between performance music.

- 1) Algebra 1 – The District's Teaching and Learning Department has established guidelines for determining who should enroll in algebra in the eighth grade. It is now apparent that each of our middle schools has applied the guidelines in different ways. At her request I have authorized Ms. Yehle to apply a different standard for admission to algebra that more closely matches the other schools in the East area. You will receive a letter from the school describing the criteria for admission to Algebra that the school used and your child's level of performance on the criteria. After reviewing your child's relationship to the criteria, if you wish them to enroll in Algebra, the school will honor your request. The process for enrolling will be in the letter you receive.
- 2) Foreign Language – As with algebra, the foreign language offerings in our middle schools vary substantially from school to school. I have reviewed the foreign language programs at Blackhawk and O'Keeffe. Sherman is in line with Blackhawk's foreign language program but offers less class time in foreign language than O'Keeffe. Sherman has increased the amount of foreign language in the sixth grade for next year from 8 weeks to one semester to increase the exposure of students to foreign language; this decision was based on the knowledge that early exposure to foreign language increases the likelihood of success with a second language. Admission to the second year of a foreign language in the freshman year of high school is not based on the amount of time the language is offered in the middle school, but on the middle school teacher's assessment of the fluency level of the student. Sherman does not appear to be different than many of our other middle schools, we will continue with the schedule for foreign language as planned.
- 3) Performance Music – There are concerns that when the performance music classes were moved back into the school day, students who elect to take the class are then required to miss one day of

some exploratory classes. In previous years, students were required to miss all of one or more exploratory classes completely in order to take performance music. Given the middle school philosophy of having students explore as many choices as possible, the schedule for next year allows students more opportunity for exploration than the previous year's schedule. Ms. Yehle has assured students and parents that missing an exploratory class period will not place a burden on the student who chooses to also take performance music. Performance music will be available during the eighth hour for students who cannot or choose not to take it during the school day. This increases the opportunities for more students to be a part of the music program. Hopefully, this will allow the performance music program to rebuild its numbers and become a much more viable part of Sherman's future.

Ann Yehle has done an outstanding job of reestablishing Sherman as an outstanding school and has my complete confidence. I encourage you to call her at school, or email her at ayehle@madison.k12.wi.us if you still have questions about the schedule or about anything else regarding your child's experience at Sherman.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Art Rainwater". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Art Rainwater
Superintendent of Schools