High School Comparison: Advanced Levels of Academic Core Courses

For years there has been broad disparity among the four MMSD high schools in the number of honors, advanced/accelerated, and AP courses each one offers. In contrast to East and LaFollette, for instance, West requires all students, regardless of learning level or demonstrated competence, to take standard academic core courses in 9th and 10th grade. There has also been wide discrepancy in the requirements and restrictions each school imposes on students who seek to participate in existing advanced course options.

Parents of children at West have long called on administrators to address this inequity by increasing opportunities for advanced, accelerated instruction. Last year Superintendent Dan Nerad affirmed the goal of bringing consistency to the opportunities offered to students across the District. Accordingly, the Talented and Gifted Education Plan includes five Action Steps specifically geared toward bringing consistency and increasing student participation in advanced courses across MMSD high schools. This effort was supposed to inform the MMSD master course list for the 2010/11 school year. Though District administrators say they have recently begun internal conversations to address the opportunity gap for advanced learners, next year's course offerings remain the same.

Please consider what levels of English, science, and social studies each MMSD high school offers its respective 9th and 10th graders for the 2010-11 school year, and what measures each school uses to determine students' eligibility for advanced or honors level courses.

EAST:

- English 9, three levels: regular, advanced, and honors. Prerequisite for honors level: students must complete Honors committee application process.
- English 10, three levels: regular, advanced, and honors. Prerequisite for honors level: signature of 9th grade English instructor.
- US History 9, two levels: regular and honors. Prerequisite for honors level: students must complete Honors committee application process.
- World History 10, two levels: regular and honors. Prerequisite for honors level: US History or US History Honors.
- Biology (9), two levels: regular and honors. Prerequisite for honors level: students must complete Honors committee application process.
- Chemistry (10), one level (optional embedded honors designation).

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East's website explains:

Honors Courses (formerly known as TAG courses) offer motivated, willing, and able students opportunities to learn in an environment that demands and supports the following:

- *In-depth content study*
- *Extensive and varied reading*
- *Critical and analytical discussion*
- *Increasingly sophisticated research and writing*
- *A high degree of student independence and responsibility*

To determine students' eligibility for placement in honors courses, East uses the following multiple measures:

- scores on the WKCE, MAP, or other state standardized test;
- a self assessment;
- a student essay written to a prompt provided by the subject matter teacher at the high school;
- approval of the student's current teacher in the relevant subject area (there is a form for the teacher to complete with ratings and comments);
- scores on other tests (e.g. EXPLORE, ACT, SAT) as additional evidence of competency (optional).

LAFOLLETTE:

- English 9, two levels: regular and honors. Prerequisite for honors level: teacher recommendation.

- English 10: two levels: regular and honors. Prerequisite for honors level: English 9 or teacher recommendation.

- US History 9, two levels: regular and honors. Prerequisite for honors level: eighth grade history (evidently self-selection for students who have completed 8th grade history).

- Modern World History 10, two levels: regular and honors. Prerequisite for honors level: none listed (evidently self-selection).

- Biology (9-10), two levels: General Biology I and Honors Biology I. Prerequisite for honors level: recommendation of 8th grade science teacher.

- Physics (10-12), four levels: Practical Physical Science, Physical Science, General Physics, and Math Physics I. Prerequisite for Math Physics I: Algebra, Biology I or other science.

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MEMORIAL:

- English 9, one level.

  Some students with high motivation and ability are allowed to skip English 9 and take English 10 or English 10 Honors.

- English 10, three levels: directed, regular, and honors. Prerequisite for honors level: recommendation of English 9 teacher.

- History 9, one level: American Experience I & II (1900-1930; 1930-2000).

- World History (10), two levels: regular and World History AP. Prerequisite for World History AP: signature of American Experience I & II teacher, student and parent signature on summer project handout (project due during registration in August).

- Science 9, one level: Integrated Science.

- Biology (10-12), two levels: Fundamentals of Biology and Biology. Prerequisite for Biology: science teacher's signature.

- Chemistry (10-12): three levels: Chem-Com, Math Chemistry, and Chemistry AP. Prerequisite for Chemistry AP: science teacher's signature and one year of chemistry or the equivalent with a grade of B (Math Chemistry recommended).

WEST:

- English 9, one level.

  Students with standardized test scores in the 95th percentile or higher in language arts may opt to skip English 9 and take English 10. This option places these 9th grade students randomly in sections of English 10, a standard course for 10th graders with no ability grouping or systematically differentiated curriculum.

- English 10, one level.

- US History 9, one level.

- Western Civilization 10, one level.

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Note: Within the standard, grade-level classrooms of English 10 and Western Civilization 10, West offers an "embedded honors designation." The embedded honors designation varies widely from teacher to teacher. It entails no systematically differentiated instruction, objectives, or strategies, and it does not provide the in-class intense exploration of topics and the high level of cognitive thinking in group discussions and classroom lectures that would motivate and challenge gifted students to develop their potential.

- Biology (9), two levels: regular and accelerated. Prerequisite for Accelerated Biology: score in the top 24 or higher on the Accelerated Biology qualifying exam. The cut score for the exam varies, since the school accepts only enough students to fill one section of the course.

- Chemistry (10), two levels: General Chemistry and Chemistry. Prerequisite for Chemistry: successful completion of Algebra I or Integrated Math I and Biology I.