

Memo: Community Forums on the Heterogeneous Grouping Initiative

Dear Arlington Community,

At the Arlington Public Schools, we are committed to providing an excellent and equitable education for all students. We are constantly searching for ways to improve upon and innovate the design of our curricular offerings. Over the past year, we have been exploring our leveling practices and considering options for implementing adjustments in grade 9 to provide more equitable access to rigorous coursework for all students.

After much consideration, we are currently exploring a pilot in 9th Grade English Language Arts (ELA) for all 9th-grade students next school year. We have included the full proposal for this pilot below, developed by the study group described below. We would like to hear your thoughts, concerns, and perspectives on this proposal before presenting it to the community and Arlington School Committee.

What We Have Done This Year

This fall, AHS convened a representative study group of students, educators, and community members to examine the potential impact of launching a pilot of heterogeneous grouping at the high school. This group:

- Reviewed current leveling practices in the high school;
- Considered our school mission and values;
- Reviewed research on leveling and heterogeneous grouping;
- Reviewed school longitudinal data on student achievement;
- Gathered feedback from student and teacher focus groups;
- Gathered feedback from neighboring high performing schools;
- Hosted webinars on growth mindset and heterogeneous grouping in neighboring schools;
- Reviewed proposals from the relevant departments; and
- Developed the attached proposal for feedback from the community.

Proposal for School Year 2022-23

For School Year 2022-23, we propose that 9th grade ELA classes be heterogeneously grouped. By this we mean that all students in general education grade 9 ELA will no longer be grouped by perceived ability level. Within each class, teachers will provide differentiated activities and supports to ensure that each student is adequately challenged and supported. This [full proposal](#) highlights the differences between the current grouping practices and the new structures we are considering. It also addresses common misconceptions and questions ([see FAQ](#)) about heterogeneous grouping. You can also view this [student-produced video](#) about the initiative.

Opportunities to Engage and Provide Feedback

We plan to hold 2 In-person Community Focus Groups and an online Community Forum in order to hear from stakeholders about their ideas, concerns, and questions about this proposal.

Because there is widespread interest in this topic, we want to take the opportunity to ensure that the community understands the proposal and has the opportunity to offer input to ensure the final decision best serves the interests of all students.

The intention of these focus groups is not to host a debate or tally a vote. Instead, they are designed to increase understanding of the curriculum and proposal, learn about families' expectations for the curriculum at the High School, understand families' hopes and concerns about the proposed pilot, and consider how we should measure success in providing an excellent and equitable education for all students.

Please [RSVP HERE](#) to reserve a space at an **in-person** community focus group:

- Tuesday, March 22, 6:15-7:30 pm - at the AHS Discourse Lab (50 spaces)
- Monday, March 28, 6:15-7:30 pm - at the AHS Discourse Lab (50 spaces)

There will be a **virtual** community forum open to all on:

- Tuesday, April 5, 6:15-7:30 pm - Online Open to All - [REGISTER HERE](#)

There will also be two presentations to members of the Arlington School Committee:

- Tuesday, March 29th - Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and Accountability Subcommittee - 4:00pm - Virtual;
- Thursday April 14th - Presentation to Full School Committee - 6:30pm - Online

In advance of the community forums, we ask that all attending take the time to review the full proposal if at all possible. We thank you for engaging with us, sharing your thoughts with the study group and administration, and for your continued partnership in developing an excellent and equitable educational environment for Arlington's students.

Sincerely,

Dr. Matthew Janger, AHS Principal

Dr. Elizabeth C. Homan, APS Superintendent

And Members of the AHS HGI Study Group

Proposal:

An Equitable and Supportive
Learning Experience for ALL
Arlington High School 9th Grade English
Language Arts (ELA) Students

Timeline: School Year 2022-23

Target Population: 9th Grade Students



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Proposal and Objectives

It is the belief of the AHS and APS administrations that the proposal that follows is designed to ensure an excellent and equitable education for ALL Arlington students, and that the adjustments proposed below stand to benefit all learners by holding them to high expectations and standards.

The AHS Administration, in partnership with stakeholders that include teachers, students, and families of APS students across levels, propose that for School Year 2022-23, students will be placed into 9th grade ELA classes without a leveling distinction associated with the section (in other words, students will be “heterogeneously grouped” in 9th grade ELA). Students will have the opportunity to choose honors level learning and expectations in order to earn the honors designation. This structural adjustment provides all students with access to rigorous curriculum and instruction with appropriate support. Within each class, teachers will provide flexible and personalized instruction to ensure that each student is adequately challenged and supported.

This proposal, if approved, will be piloted in the 2022-23 school year. If approved to move forward, this pilot is designed to contribute to the accomplishment of the following three goals:

1. Provide all 9th grade students with the opportunity to learn with a diverse group of their peers and to be held to a higher and more consistent educational standard than has previously been possible in other models of instruction;
2. Support teachers through common planning time and team-based teaching to provide differentiated instruction to smaller classes of 9th grade students in ELA; and
3. Assess the effectiveness of elimination of fixed ability-grouping for 9th grade students at Arlington High School in a single disciplinary area.

The Study Group

This proposal was discussed and developed over the course of three months by a group of APS parents, teachers, and students, whose names are listed below. The group included parents who represented the full range of Arlington Public School grade levels as well as representatives from the Arlington Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC) and the Arlington Human Rights Commission (AHRC). The group also included representatives from

our student affinity groups, including our Black Student Union, Gender and Sexuality Alliance, and our Anti-racism Working Group.

The study group engaged with research on heterogeneous and ability grouping practices in education, discussed possible models for assessing the effectiveness of leveling or unleveling practices in high school, and ultimately gathered consensus on the proposal and process for gathering feedback that follows.

The HGI Study Group engaged in the following activities to inform this proposal:

- Convened a representative group of students, educators, and community members
- Held 13 meetings to review a variety of research and scholarly thinking about the topic of tracking, honors programming, and growth mindset, including metastudies reviewing that research
- Reviewed longitudinal academic and demographic data comparing honors and advanced level outcomes
- Hosted webinars on growth mindset and heterogeneous grouping in neighboring schools
- Engaged in 2 in-person focus groups and a webinar with members of the public at large to gather community feedback
- Gathered feedback from student and teacher focus groups
- Gathered feedback from neighboring high performing schools
- Reported out current state of findings to the CIAA subcommittee
- Considered options for heterogeneous grouping in ELA, science, and history, and determined to go forward with only ELA this year
- Collaborated with AHS administration and the ELA department to develop this proposal

Importantly, this group included individuals who did not come into the work with unified opinions about heterogeneous / ability grouping practices. The group's time and discussions were protected and were not discussed outside of the group with the larger community, in order to create a space where participants could speak freely without fear of judgment or retaliation. This proposal is a result of the HGI Study Group's collective work, and it is the hope of its members that this proposal will be supported by the School Committee and the broader Arlington community. The committee members include:

Elizabeth Homan, Superintendent
Matthew Janger, Principal
Lynne Bennett, Special Education Coordinator
Alison Elmer, Director of Special Education
Matthew Coleman, Math Dept. Chair
Denny Conklin, History Dept. Chair
Sam Hoyo, Science Dept. Chair
Deborah Perry, English Dept. Chair
Liana Besette, English teacher
Justn Bourassa, English teacher
Nicole Eidso, English teacher

Kevin Richardson, English teacher
Mark Petrozzino, Science teacher
Annalise Abdelnour, Special education teacher
Karen Botcheller, School Counselor
Sam Gebremedin, Math teacher
Adrina Santangelo, Student, Class of 22
Greta Billingsley, Student, Class of 23
Hannah Markelz, Student, Class of 23
Lilliane McGloin, Student, Class of 23
Sebastian Paz-Worden, Student, Class of 24
Jasper Zellmer, Student, Class of 24
Inae Hwang, Parent, SEPAC Chair
Lisa Chiulli Lay, Parent
Catherine Fenollosa, Parent
Lois Kaznicki, Parent
Caitlin Lauchlan, Parent
Lori Leahy, Parent
Jennifer Levine, Parent
Lauren Patel, Parent
Emma Penti, Parent
Nicole Pinsky, Parent
Lesley Scott-Morton, Parent
Larry Slotnick, Parent
Rajeev Soneja, Parent
Tracey Spence Hamilton, Parent
Pete Whiting, Parent

Why We are Interrogating Ability Grouping at AHS

For at least the past 10 years, Arlington High School has reviewed our course pathways and instructional practices to improve academic achievement and equity. This has included more opportunities for students to accelerate their learning, and has removed structural barriers to students accessing high level, college preparatory curriculum. In keeping with research on student learning, we have worked toward greater levels of inclusion and high standards for all students. This has included the creation of co-taught sections in required classes in ELA, History, Science, and Math in grades 9 and 10 as well as eliminating Curriculum B level courses in our general education programs. This experience has increased our capacity for educating diverse groups of students in inclusive classroom settings, and has been driven by our values, professional standards, and evidence that these approaches are in the best interests of our students.

Addressing Disproportionate Outcomes for Students

Our commitment to inclusive education is embedded in our educational system. In 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court determined that separate educational systems could not inherently be equal, they recognized the negative impact that segregating students has on their development. This was further emphasized when, in 1975, President Ford signed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which established the concept of “Least Restrictive Environment” as the basis for educating students with disabilities.

Accreditation organizations and the DESE have also endorsed moving away from fixed ability grouping in high schools; the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the accreditation process we follow, calls for students to have at least two core content area courses that are heterogeneously grouped. The state’s system of Multi-tiered Systems of Support argues for inclusive pedagogy. Finally, this principle is reflected in the first objective of our district goals which reads, “Students will engage in inclusive pedagogy and curricula that are designed in response to the district’s vision of Student as Learner and Global Citizen with an emphasis on anti-racist teaching practices, transferable skills and aligned with state standards and coherent within each discipline.” As such, we should make every effort to adopt more inclusive alternative practices when they present themselves as both viable and beneficial for student experience and learning.

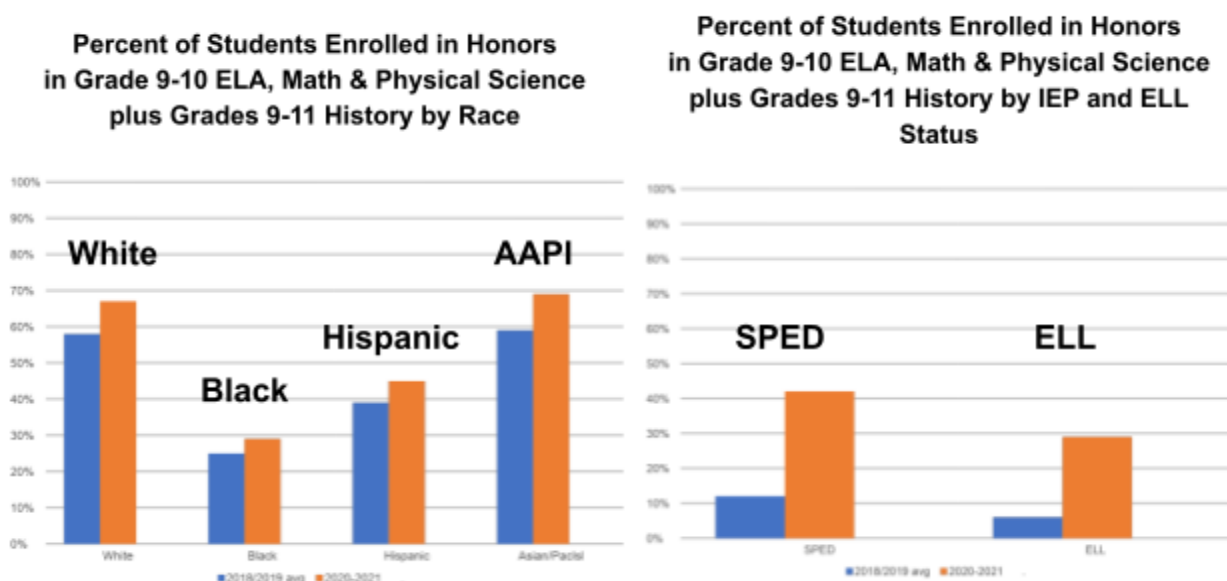
Arlington High School is consistently ranked as one of the most high achieving and rigorous schools in the state and across the country. Nonetheless, we see evidence of disproportionate experiences for students who identify as BIPOC, ELL, or receiving special education services. This appears in disproportionate rates of participation in honors curriculum, as well as disproportionality in reports of student experiences and overall student achievement – ***both for students in these subgroups and for their peers*** (see [here](#)). In addition, we find that the process of leveling inadvertently creates relatively stable tracks that segregate our student population. It is our hope that this effort will improve those outcomes for the participating students and give us information and experience to improve further in the future.

We see strong evidence of disproportionate participation in honors level work in grades 9 and 10. In addition, we find that the likelihood of students changing levels after being placed into a level at Grade 9 is relatively small. Thus, while our current practices allow students to choose between honors and advanced courses, the impact is the tracking and segregating of our student body during their high school years. Roughly $\frac{2}{3}$ of AHS students are currently enrolled at the honors level in most of these courses. Nonetheless, even though we know that talent and academic excellence is evenly distributed across races, ethnicities, abilities, and identities, we find students of color and students with IEPs under-represented at the honors level. African American students enroll in honors at slightly less than half the rate of all other racial groups, and Latinx students are 1.5 times less likely to be in honors than white students.

These trends certainly stand to have a lasting and negative impact on students of color, students with IEPs, and students who are English Learners. However, they also have a negative impact on ALL students by separating students from the diverse perspectives, identities, and approaches to learning that have the potential to raise standards and expectations for

engagement, collaboration, and different ways of understanding and engaging with content across disciplines. When we reflect on those times we have been held to our highest standards and expectations in our work as adults and as students, we notice that our most impactful and challenging work has been accomplished when surrounded by a diverse group of peers towards a shared, relevant goal. This is the experience of rigor we wish to enable for AHS students.

Once a student has elected honors or advanced level courses, their likelihood of changing levels in the coming years is relatively small. In 2019-2020, the odds of taking 10th grade Honors ELA were 132 times higher if a student took 9th grade honors than if they took 9th advanced. Under the heterogeneous model in 2020-21, the odds of a student taking 10th grade honors ELA was 10.7 times higher if a student took 9th grade honors than if they took 9th advanced ELA. This means that patterns set in grade 9 have a long term impact on the composition of the school and the student experience.



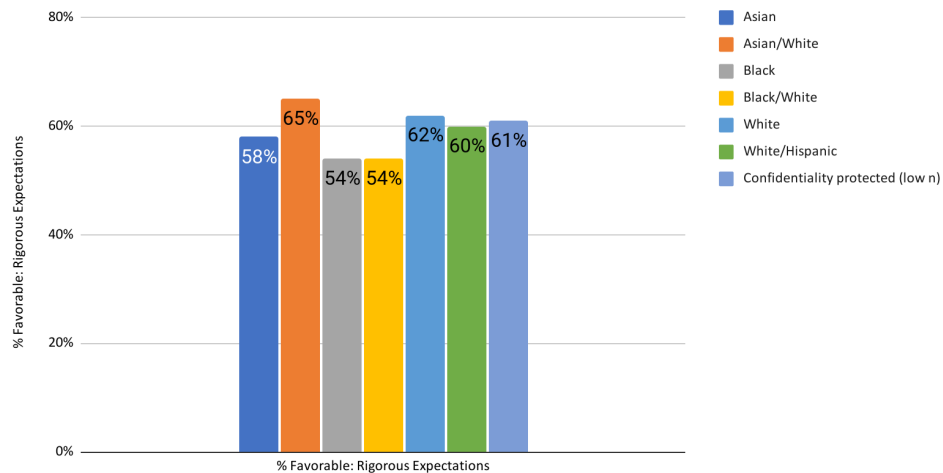
Percentage of students reporting experience of rigorous expectations

We also know that “engagement” with school and sense of belonging at school are both linked to feeling challenged. In other words, adults must believe in students’ capacity to access challenging content and engage with rigorous tasks. As BIPOC students and students with IEPs are concentrated in certain levels, they report a different experience of challenge and rigor than their peers. In the 2021 AHS Fall Culture and Climate Survey, fewer black students and fewer students with IEPs reported positively on the questions measuring their experience of rigorous expectations than did their white and Asian-American peers and their peers without IEPs. The gap is 8 percent between students identifying as black and those identifying as white. These results are mirrored across categories on the Culture and Climate Surveys, from student belonging to teacher-student relationships. A positive experience with school is a

precondition for academic success, and AHS's current structure for course leveling reinforces deficit ideologies about student capabilities and limits our ability to provide challenging content to all students, regardless of their respective identities. More evidence and information about why we are pursuing this intervention in AHS is included in the [Addressing Educational \(In\)Equity Across APS](#) section of this document.

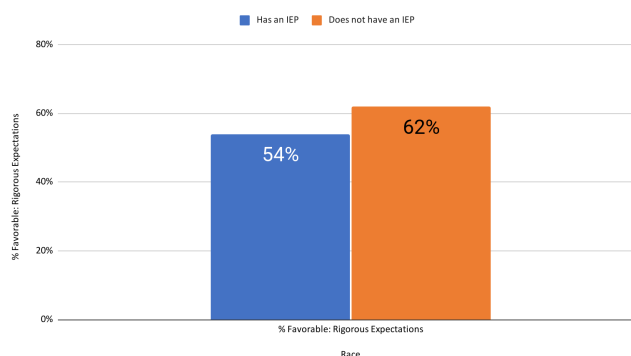
Climate and Culture Survey AHS Fall 2021: Rigorous Expectations and Race

% Favorable: Rigorous Expectations vs. Race



Climate and Culture Survey AHS Fall 2021: Rigorous Expectations and Special Education Status

% Favorable: Rigorous Expectations vs. Special Education Status



Evidence of Benefits for AHS Students

Recent experience during the pandemic has led us to look more closely at heterogeneous grouping as a focus for improvement efforts. Following the many changes brought on by remote learning, teachers led the charge to help us examine which pandemic practices brought positive outcomes. Given the overall challenge and disruption of the pandemic, we are fully aware that

any experience comes from a different and undesirable context. Based on our experience, we have maintained the new expectation that all teachers use Google Classroom as their primary means for assigning and communicating about work. We fully adopted a 1:1 expectation for chromebooks or laptops. We looked at other practices including semesterised classes, 80-minute periods, and heterogeneous grouping. During the 2020-21 school year, we implemented heterogeneous classes in grade 9-10 ELA, grade 9-11 history, grade 9 science, and geometry. Of all of these pandemic-era adjustments, heterogeneous grouping stood out; with strong teacher support, positive educational measures, and relatively positive responses from participants, it was necessary for us to examine the viability of this model moving forward.

Based on these experiences, the study group explored options for piloting heterogeneous grouping in grades 9 and 10 in ELA, science, and history. After much deliberation, the study group has determined to focus the pilot on grade 9 ELA. However, our experience indicates that there is promise for the approach to spread to other grade levels and subjects if it is successful in ELA. Importantly, there is significant support from educators to expand this approach to other disciplines.

In the classes where we implemented heterogeneous grouping for the first time, we saw a 16% increase overall in honors level participation. In addition, we saw honors participation increases in every historically marginalized group:

- 250% increase in special education students taking Honors
- 400% increase in English Language Learners taking Honors
- 15% increase in White students taking Honors
- 38% increase in Hispanic/Latinx students taking Honors
- 17% increase in Asian/Pacific Islander students taking Honors
- 16% increase in African American students taking Honors

Grades for students electing honors increased by 4% and grades for students electing advanced curriculum remained steady, in spite of the many challenges produced by remote instruction ([see here for more information on outcomes from SY 2020-21](#)). This is not meant to argue that the heterogeneous experience last year was the model we would want to follow. The change created by the shift to remote learning was disruptive for all students and produced many negative impacts. Notably, families and students have asked for the pilot of this model to include a stronger focus on higher standards, on consistent instruction across classes and teachers, and a focus on development and collaborative support for teachers to ensure that “honors” does not simply mean “more work,” but “deeper work.”

Our Proposal: A Vision for the Future of 9th Grade

The transition from grade 8 into high school is an important one. Students begin making decisions that will affect their secondary pathways, their peer groups, and their postsecondary plans. Currently, students make the decision about honors and advanced coursework in the

spring of grade 8. For many, that is a decision that sets the pathway for their high school career. This has the unintended consequence of tracking our students and segregating our school.

By focusing on 9th grade ELA, we plan to give students an opportunity to experience honors level learning, interact with their peers, as they make the transition to high school. We have a goal to see higher levels of honors participation, but more importantly, **we expect to see better grades, higher levels of engagement, and sustained improvement over time for ALL students.** By piloting in grade 9, we can also learn whether this model is one that can help us reshape the 9th grade year to best support and challenge our students. Our proposal is to create a rigorous and supportive, team-based format for rigorous grade 9 ELA.

Equitable Student Placement in 9th Grade ELA

The committee believes that heterogeneous grouping in grade 9 ELA will be the best interest of all students. There are a number of different options for how to organize grading, activities, and standards for this goal. Students might choose their level of learning early in the course, “Honors by Choice.” They might earn the honors designation by the level of work they engage in during the course, “Earned Honors.” Or, we might recognize that all students are capable of doing honors level work and differentiate to bring all students to the same high standard, “Honors for All.” All of these approaches are currently being used successfully at neighboring high schools. After much consideration, the study group settled on the “Honors by Choice” option as the one that most closely fits our current practices and grading policies.

By choosing this approach for the pilot, we will be able to draw on our current experience and community understanding as we delve more into how to differentiate and support higher level learning in an inclusive classroom setting.

Recommendation - Honors by Choice:

In our proposal, students will be placed into 9th grade ELA classes without a leveling distinction associated with the section (in other words, students will be “heterogeneously grouped” in 9th grade ELA). Grade 8 course requests will still include teacher recommendations and students will elect honors or advanced ELA as part of the course selection process. However, this will not represent a commitment. We will use this to advise students and to balance the class assignments and as a datapoint for assessment of the effectiveness of the initiative. Students will elect the level of work as part of their work in the courses.

As in our other heterogeneous courses, after an orientation period students will choose whether to pursue the honors or advanced expectations. They will choose after week 4 of the first semester and then after week 2 of the second semester. This will give them two opportunities to adjust and elect the appropriate level of challenge. Student reports will list the course as either honors or advanced and students will be assigned the appropriate weight by semester.

Honors students will be graded against expectation for higher levels of complexity and sophistication. While all students will read the same core texts, honors work will entail more

complex analysis and understanding. Honors work may also include more challenging supplemental and independent reading. For writing assignments, honors students would have more challenging prompts and expectations. Rubrics would ask for more complex and sophisticated use of writing elements (e.g., vocabulary, complex sentences) and more sophisticated structures or approaches (e.g, integrating multiple perspectives, responding to counter arguments, applying concepts to novel situations). Similarly speaking assignments would call for higher level thinking.

Other Options Considered - Earned Honors

In this model, all students have the opportunity to earn an honor designation on their grade and reports. They do not make a commitment to their level of pursuit at the beginning of a term. Instead, they earn the honors designation based on the work they complete and skills they master during the term.

In the model we considered, students earning a B+ or higher would earn the honors designation and weight on their grade. Our current grading practice sets B as the grade for students who meet standards for content knowledge, complex reasoning skills, and work habits. Thus the honors level designation would require work that exceeds the standard in the course. Teachers would identify expectations and tasks necessary for students to demonstrate that they exceeded the class standard and earned the honors designation. To define honors standard work, this model would use similar approaches as the Honors by Choice model. The difference would be in grading, allowing students to choose that level of work and work toward the honors distinction.

An advantage of this is that it can encourage all students to engage in honors level learning, rather than distinguishing between the students. However, it also raised concerns including: that it is more unfamiliar to our community; that it can increase focus on the grade and weighted GPA; and that it might create more stress for students interested in pursuing honors level learning.

Other Options Considered - Honors for All

In this model, all students earn an honors designation and participate in the same rigorous curriculum. This model recognizes that all students are capable of doing honors level work with appropriate support and multiple pathways to access and demonstrate mastery of the content and skills in the course.

Our current grading practice sets B as the grade for students who meet standards for content knowledge, Thus, the grade of A designates work that exceeds the course standard. Exceptional work would be recognized by earning an A, exceeding the standard. To exceed the standard (earn an A) students would demonstrate more complex analysis and understanding.

As with honors work in the Earned Honors model, above standard work might also include challenging supplemental and independent reading. For writing assignments, A standard work might attempt more challenging prompts or meet higher expectations. Rubrics would ask for

more complex and sophisticated use of writing elements (e.g., vocabulary, complex sentences) and more sophisticated structures (e.g., integrating multiple perspectives, responding to counter arguments, applying concepts to novel situations). Similarly speaking assignments would call for higher level thinking.

An advantage of this approach is that it eliminates the division between different types of students or student expectations. Instead it expresses and supports high expectations for all students. This model raised concerns including: that it is more unfamiliar to our community; that it would not provide sufficient challenge for high achieving students; that the grades would not recognize a sufficient range of student achievement. Effectively implemented, Honors for All more closely reflects the values we are pursuing as a school. We want to remove distinctions between students and, instead, support all students in accessing and reaching the highest levels of learning.

As we develop the Honors by Choice model in our grade 9 ELA, we will keep that vision in mind to make sure that the process of choice provides access and opportunities for all students to access the higher level learning that is pursued by those who choose honors.

Supporting Teacher Implementation in 9th Grade ELA

Our ELA department is enthusiastic and confident about pursuing this approach, because they have been working toward this for some time. They use a common curriculum for advanced and honors classes and use common texts, assignments, activities, and assessments. Both the advanced and honors level courses focus on a rigorous college preparatory curriculum. As noted above, the differences have to do with expectation for levels of depth, complexity, and sophistication in the work being done.

Our ELA department already has a fair amount of experience with heterogeneous grouping, as that is a format in many upper level courses. This fall, as we have been studying the question of leveling, the teachers have been further examining the curriculum and determining their needs for training and planning time. Professional development around curriculum planning will focus on clarifying and defining expectations for higher level learning at the honors and advanced level. You can see more details of the [ninth grade curriculum description](#).

We anticipate between 360 and 400 grade 9 students in SY 2022-23. We plan to offer 18 sections of grade 9 ELA which will create classes of 20-22. If necessary, we would add an additional section to keep class sizes under 21. There will be three sections assigned to each of 6 periods, creating teams of 3 teachers in each period. In addition, we will assign a special education co teacher to 4 of those periods to support co teaching. These teachers will have a common planning period which will allow them to meet together up to 4 periods per week. The teams will collaborate on curriculum planning, assessment, and student support planning, in order to align their curricula, assignments, expectations.

We already have a great deal of expertise within our ELA teaching and administrative staff. In order to plan and develop materials, our teachers anticipate the need for a spring retreat. This

will allow time to plan for summer work. Summer work will entail one week of time for the team to plan, study, and participate in any training. During the 2022-23 school year, the teachers will benefit from weekly common planning time as well as a fall and spring planning retreat. In order to support the teaching team, we want to set aside funds for a consultant or to attend training.

The focus of the training and planning will include:

- Defining expectations for higher level learning (developing rubrics, materials, activities, and assessments). Setting expectations for honors and advanced level work.
- Reviewing and implementing concepts of differentiation and UDL, such as:
 - Effective scaffolds for struggling learners (e.g., graphic organizers, sentence frames) and extension activities (tiering learning menus, literature circles, independent reading) for learners ready for more advanced work.
 - Use of diagnostic and formative assessments to inform instruction
 - How to explicitly teach cooperative and independent learning skills to students.

Supporting Student Needs

With appropriate support, we have found that all students in general education ELA classes are able to meet the college preparatory expectations of our curriculum. Over the past 5 years, we have developed a co taught model in which a special education teacher works with a content area specialist in the same class. By providing specialized instruction in the classroom, this process has helped us develop scaffolding and supports that assist all students. These include support for reading comprehension (e.g., study guides) and for writing (e.g., graphic organizers, sentence frames). As part of our planning process, we will review concepts around universal design for learning. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach to teaching and learning that helps give all students an equal opportunity to succeed. This approach offers flexibility in the ways students access material, engage with it and show what they know.

Summer curriculum work has been planned for as a component of the normal planning and budgeting process. The APS will set aside necessary funds for all AHS ELA teachers to participate in spring and summer retreats and planning. In addition, the cost of consulting, training, and support for the teachers is estimated at \$10,000, and has been accounted for in the district's planning for FY23.

Assessing the Effectiveness of the 9th Grade ELA Pilot

Our goal in this program is to improve student achievement and engagement for all students. As such, we will track and expect to see equal or improved outcomes in the areas below:

- (1) **Honors level participation:** Our expectation is that exposure to honors level learning will inspire more students with the interest and confidence to pursue the honors level. As such, we expect to see a statistically significant increase in the proportion of students electing honors level work. We will measure this across all demographic groups and will look for a decrease in disproportionality among these groups.

- (2) **Student Grades:** Grades are our primary and most reliable indicator of student learning. As students are engaged in more diverse classes and more rigorous work, we would be looking for grades to remain steady or improve overall. Again, we would be looking for the impact on grades at both the honors and advanced levels and across all demographic groups.
- (3) **Rigorous Expectations:** On the recent Climate & Culture surveys, our BIPOC students report lower levels of challenge and belonging. To date, we have only administered these assessments at the school-level, but we have the ability to administer class- and discipline-specific surveys to assess practice at the classroom level. We plan to administer the survey at the classroom level in ELA classes in Spring 2022 in order to gain baseline data for comparison in spring 2023. Again, we would be looking for these measures to improve or remain steady at both the honors and advanced levels and across all demographic groups. We may also use classroom-level surveys to assess the impact and possibility of possible expansion to 9th grade science in future years, depending upon the success of the 9th grade ELA pilot.
- (4) **Future enrollment in honors:** Another valuable indicator of the success of the model will be if the impacts are sustained for students over time. We will be able to look at student course requests, and later course participation, in order to see whether students continue to enroll in honors classes at the same or higher rates and across demographic groups.
- (5) **Achievement and MCAS scores:** MCAS scores will not be available for over a year after the conclusion of the pilot. However, we will look with great interest to see whether there is a visible impact on student standardized test scores across all demographic groups.

By April of 2023, we will analyze initial results on all of these measures in order to determine whether to continue the pilot or expand it. This will be a holistic decision, based on input from teachers and students as well as the outcome data above. We will want to weigh the success of the pilot and the costs associated with going forward.

Implications for Other Disciplinary Areas

Initially, teachers in both grade 9 science (Introduction to Physical Science) and grade 9 history (Modern World History) requested to pilot heterogeneous grouping in the 2022-23 school year.

Early in the process, the history department determined that their current improvement work required their attention. They were engaged in revising curriculum to include more diverse perspectives and narratives. The department believed that these curriculum changes will lead more students to see their identities in the curriculum and therefore, also help promote equity. As these efforts move forward, the department is focused on aligning their standards and grading practices. They have been focusing on the process outlined in *Grading for Equity; What*

It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms. This process will prepare this department for considering heterogeneous grouping in future years.

The science department went through a process similar to that of ELA. They also felt that they were ready to pilot heterogeneous grouping in the coming year. Both departments met with members of the study group to explain their thinking and plans. There were more concerns and questions about how heterogeneous grouping can be applied in the sciences. In our community feedback, many expressed the view that honors level work required coverage of more science content and would be difficult if not impossible to do well.

Our goal was to reach consensus within the study group and support in the community, so the science department agreed to hold back to learn from the outcome of the pilot project in ELA. Our understanding of higher level learning in the sciences would argue that science learning should focus on depth and complexity of learning and is well suited to heterogeneous grouping. However, the view of science that focuses on rather than on content coverage is strongly held and may take more time and study to build support. Furthermore, depth of knowledge in science is linked to mathematics for some aspects of the content, and tracking practices are still in place in Mathematics across APS; this is an area of focus at the district level that requires more time to assess before adjustments can be made.

Over the next year, our science teachers plan to continue to review their curriculum and standards to bring them into alignment while engaging in opportunities for professional development regarding differentiation specific to science. Both advanced and honors level curriculum are intended to cover the same core content. Advanced curriculum emphasizes conceptual understanding of the concepts while honors level learning adds more complex and sophisticated problem solving techniques, such as mathematical components or manipulation of variables and supplementary concepts.

Addressing Educational (In)Equity Across APS

We acknowledge that the equity challenges we are seeking to address with initiatives such as the one in this proposal are, at their core, systemic in nature. This means that these challenges must be addressed through multiple interventions *at once, across the school system*, and that no individual change will disrupt systems that have provided some students with access to rigorous expectations and instruction while limiting access to the same experience for other students. Therefore, it is important to recognize that an adjustment to secondary leveling practices is only one of many strategies that APS will use to advance educational equity across the system.

At the elementary level, we notice stark achievement gaps beginning in third grade, when students first take the MCAS. In recent years in Elementary ELA, there is a slight increase in the percentage of students who are meeting or exceeding standards. We also notice that special education students, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students with

significant needs, and students of color have been consistently underperforming their more privileged peers - from the moment they are first assessed in grade 3 through their time at AHS.

These academic trends, demonstrated below with graphs showing academic achievement in ELA in grades 3-8 across various focal groups, is mirrored in students' experiences with school, according to our recent administrations of Climate and Culture surveys across the school system:

In grades 3-5:

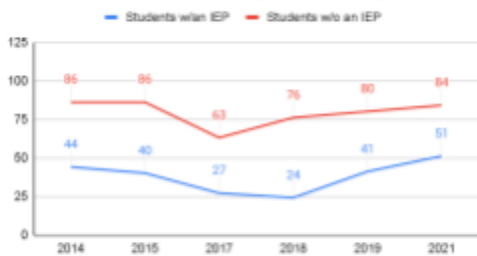
- BIPOC students' positive feelings towards school ranged from 6-18% below average across categories;
- English Learners' feelings of being held to high expectations were 10% below average;
- Students with IEPs reported 5-7% below average positive experiences of school safety, relationships with teachers, being held to high expectations, and school climate.

In grades 6-12:

- BIPOC students' report 10% below average positive experiences in the category of "rigorous expectations;"
- Students report progressively more negative experiences with school culture across all categories as they move through each subsequent school year; and
- Students with IEPs report lower-than-average positive experiences with being held to rigorous expectations, school safety, teacher-student relationships, and cultural awareness and action.

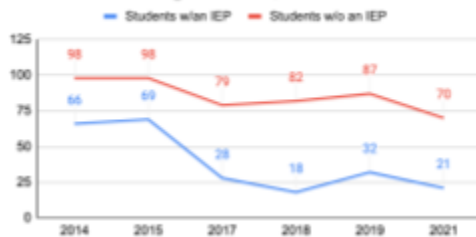
**Academic Outcomes for Students with IEPs:
Grades 3, 8, and 10
2014-2021**

Students w/IEPs: % Meeting or Exceeding



Elementary ELA:
Persistent Gap for
students with IEPs

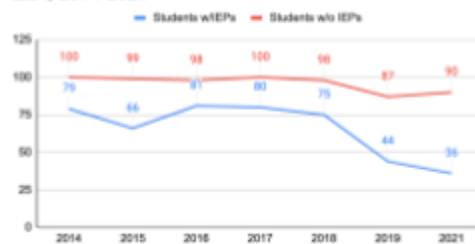
Students w/IEPs: % Meeting or Exceeding Standards in 8th grade ELA, 2014-2021



**Middle School ELA: Declining
Achievement for All Students,
Persistent or Widening Gaps for
Students on IEPs**

*Structural Leveling in Mathematics
Introduced at Grade 6

Students w/IEPs: % Meeting/Exceeding 10th grade ELA, 2014-2021

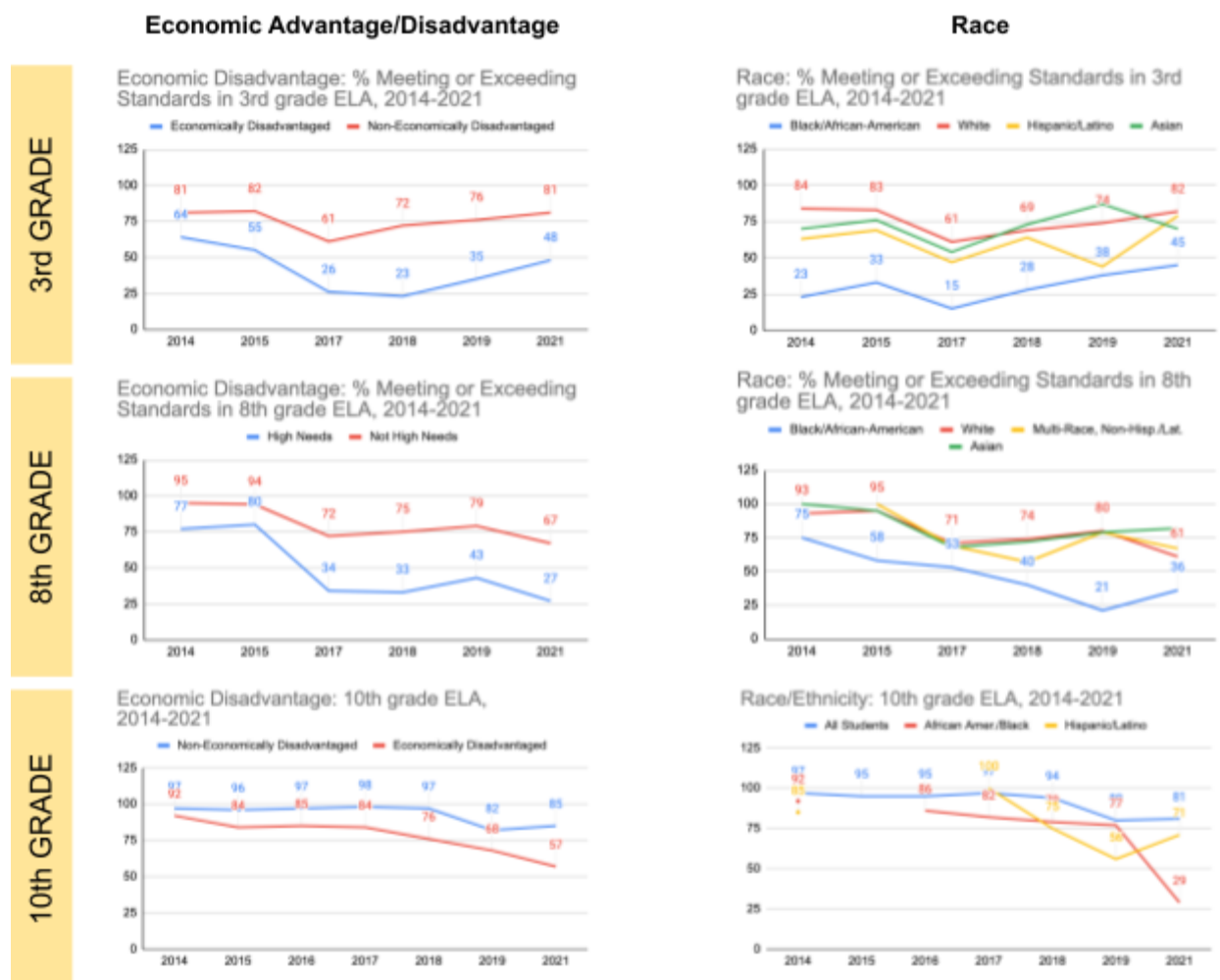


**High School ELA: Expanding
Achievement Gaps for students
with IEPs**

*Structural Leveling in ELA and other
disciplines Introduced at Grade 9

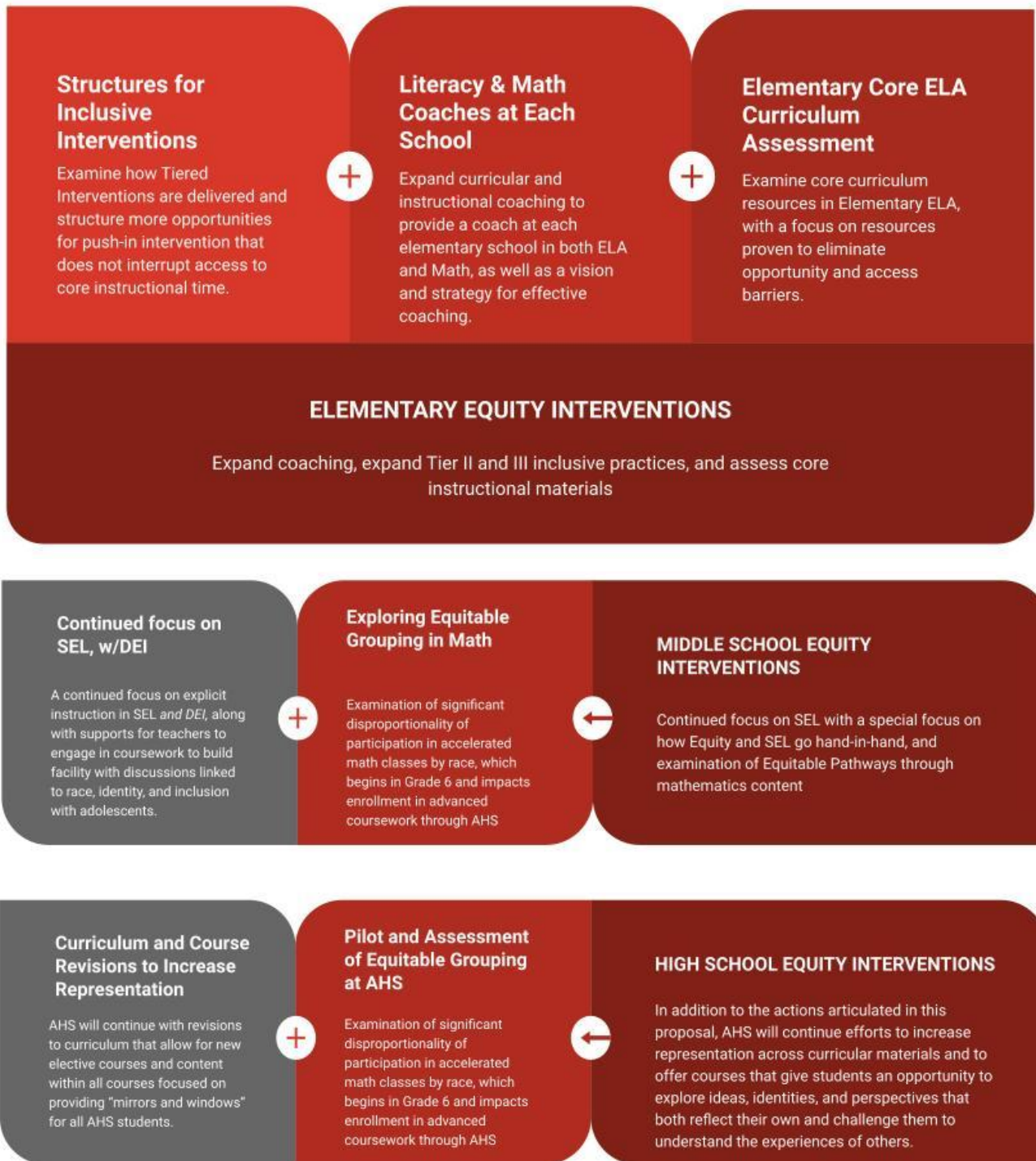
It is worth noting that tracking and grouping students by ability is not part of our full academic program until middle school (for mathematics) and high school (across subjects). The correlation between academic trends and the introduction of structural ability grouping begs the question of whether and how structural “sorting” students into specific courses by perceived ability level exacerbates achievement gaps over time by reinforcing “honors” and academic excellence as a fixed identity attainable for some, but not all, students.

The trends for students with IEPs demonstrated above are reflected for all traditionally marginalized groups of students (by race, socioeconomic status, high needs, and for students who are learning English). While some gains in elementary ELA since 2017-18 are evident at the elementary level, persistent achievement gaps are evident for historically marginalized groups of students; at the middle level, achievement levels off or even declines for historically marginalized students; and at the high school level, these trends continue and/or gaps widen.



It is important to understand that achievement gaps are “lagging indicators,” meaning that summative assessment data can provide educators with an opportunity to reflect on what has already happened and its impact. In order to address gaps, however, attention must shift to “leading indicators” and “opportunity gaps,” searching out opportunities for immediate action and adjustment of practice, such as analysis of student work, common formative assessments, and building common language about what is expected in instruction. **This proposal allows for this to occur in 9th grade ELA through the team teaching model, and serves as an opportunity for us to pilot the impact of collaborative planning at the high school level. Furthermore, this proposal intervenes by identifying an *opportunity gap* within the structures of course pathways at Arlington High School.**

To uproot this manifestation of educational inequity, we must address it at all levels of our system. We acknowledge that no single intervention, on its own, will allow all students to access all that Arlington has to offer our brilliant future leaders. Therefore, the district is moving forward with several initiatives that are intended to be “equity points of intervention,” allowing us to interrogate and interrupt inequities at all levels:



When asked about the “equity initiatives” in which the Arlington Public Schools are engaged, it is our goal for our answer to always be, “all of them.” As leaders, teachers, families, students, and as a community, if we are not consistently working towards a better experience for **ALL** Arlington students at all levels of our system, then we should re-evaluate the work in which we are engaged. We hope that the community will engage with this proposal, ask questions, and

collaborate with us as we work to develop an experience for all Arlington students that is challenging, enriching, and empowering.

Frequently Asked Questions

What does it mean to have separate leveled vs. heterogeneously grouped classes? Does heterogeneity mean “getting rid of honors?”

In heterogeneous classes students in the same class can choose to do either Honors or Curriculum A level work and earn that designation on their transcript. In other words, heterogeneous grouping does not mean eliminating honors vs. curriculum A distinctions - it means having those distinctions exist within the same class, with different students receiving differentiated instruction and assignments.

How is leveling currently handled at AHS?

[This link provides a detailed PowerPoint](#) explaining the current system of leveling at AHS. Notably, the following classes in the upper levels at AHS are already heterogeneously grouped, because doing so allows for a more diverse program of studies with more electives:

English Language Arts

- Memoir, Poetry and Fiction: Creating Literary Forms
- Missing Voices, Other Cultures
- Poetry as Art ([syllabus link](#))

History ([standards for honors vs. curric a link](#))

- American Law
- American Pop Culture
- Psychology and Human Behavior
- Social History Through Sports
- Intro to Economics
- Race, Society, and Identity
- Current Issues: America and the World
- Gender & Society

Science

- Anatomy and Physiology
- Astronomy
- Oceanography
- Environmental Science
- Engineering
- Weather and Climate
- Physiology of Exercise and Activity

Math

- Computer Science Principles (includes A, H, and AP)
- Computer Aided Drafting and Design (CADD)

What classes are being discussed in this new proposal?

For the 2022-23 school year, AHS is only considering 9th grade English classes for the Heterogeneous Grouping Initiative. Any potential discussion of future classes will depend on the outcomes and results of next year's pilot. Science teachers are also evaluating standards, curriculum, and practices with an eye toward a possible pilot in future years grade 9 Introduction to Physical Science.

Why is AHS considering heterogeneous grouping at all?

For at least the past 10 years, Arlington High School has reviewed our course pathways and instructional practices to improve academic achievement and equity. This has included more opportunities for students to accelerate their learning as well as removing structural barriers to students accessing high level, college preparatory curriculum. In keeping with [research](#) on student learning, we have worked toward greater levels of inclusion and high standards for all students. This has included the creation of co-taught sections in required classes in English, History, Science, and Math in grades 9 and 10 as well as eliminating Curriculum B level courses in our general education programs. This experience has increased our capacity for educating diverse groups of students in inclusive, supportive classroom settings.

AHS has had some classes that operate in a heterogeneous format for many years, but it has been more common in Junior and Senior level classes and electives. [There is strong research support](#) for the value of heterogeneous classes when implemented effectively in terms of improving the focus on student growth, overall student achievement, a growth mindset, and student equity.

Roughly $\frac{2}{3}$ of AHS students currently enroll at the honors level in most of these courses. Nonetheless, we find that students of color and students with IEPs under-represented at the honors level. African American students enroll in honors at slightly less than half the rate of all other racial groups, and Latinx students are 1.5 times less likely to be in honors than white students.

What *is* the research that supports heterogeneous grouping?

A recent review of thirteen meta-analyses (each of which included many studies) reveals consistent findings that the learning of all students, including those who pursued accelerated study, benefitted far more from classes that practiced such “within-class” (heterogeneous) grouping than the traditional “between-class” grouping of separate leveled courses ([Steenbergen-Hu, et al, 2016](#)).

What does the research say about grouping and struggling learners?

Isolating struggling learners in classes with only other struggling learners [has been consistently shown](#) to harm their learning and concentrate/intensify behavior problems. Defining certain

classes, and students, as “honors” or “curriculum A” creates often-harmful labels and stigma, especially for students of color.

But students can choose their own levels at AHS. Doesn't that remove these problems?

As it turns out, no. [Research](#) demonstrates that unofficial institutional and cultural barriers often prevent students, especially BIPOC students, from taking more challenging courses. In AHS's brief experience last year with heterogeneous grouping during the pandemic, honors participation by Hispanic and African American students, English Language Learners and students with Special Education codes [rose dramatically](#).

What does the research say about grouping and traditionally high achieving learners?

Research indicates that students grouped in “honors only” classrooms [often develop a fixed mindset and grow hesitant to take intellectual risks](#). Defining certain classes, and students, as “honors” or “curriculum A” not only creates [often-harmful labels and stigma](#), but distracts from the notion that “honors” should be a label applied to [what kind of learning is going on](#). A student may be *more* likely to get access to demanding, deeper learning when their teacher has to consciously has to decide to up the level of challenge, rather than just calling a class “honors” without having to actually think through what that entails.

Let's also take a moment to examine our assumptions about students' “ability” and “intelligence.”

It's not so easy, it turns out, to divide students into “smart kids” and “not so smart kids.” [Contemporary research in neuroscience](#) reveals that human brains, especially in adolescence, are incredibly plastic and adaptable. A student who is failing to achieve under certain conditions can excel in other conditions, and a student succeeding without extra support now might need them later. A heterogeneous classroom offers more potential for teachers to adapt instruction for students' ever-changing needs.

What do larger educational organizations have to say about heterogeneous grouping?

Heterogeneous grouping is a practice recommended by the Carnegie Council on Education, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

But I've read studies that say heterogeneous grouping is bad for students! Why aren't you representing this side of the argument?

Ability grouping in classes has been one of the most studied topics in the last century of educational research, with over 500 major studies. The overwhelming consensus is that separated/leveled classes do more harm than good to students. This does not mean that there

are not areas where students may choose separated courses with particularly challenging content or that may require certain preparation. What it means is that where possible, all students should be given access to the same support and resources to achieve high level standards of learning.

Can one find studies that say otherwise? Yes. But, the preponderance of evidence points to the value of inclusion. That is how research works. When read carefully, most studies that criticize heterogeneous grouping do not invalidate the overall consensus, they simply add details and counter examples that help us to implement the practice successfully.

Is this a new idea at AHS?

No. AHS already has for years run courses in the upper grades and electives in all subject areas that practice heterogeneous grouping.

In addition, in response to the pandemic, AHS instituted heterogeneous grouping in seven 9th and 10th grade courses during the 2020-21 school year. The model was not our desired approach to instruction and was implemented without a great deal of planning. Nonetheless, surprisingly positive outcomes indicated that there was capacity and interest in our teaching staff. Our experience in the 2020-21 school year [showed increased participation at the honors level in most of the heterogeneous classes](#), especially among these groups, and relatively stable levels of performance in grades. While in many ways last year's conditions were not ideal or typical of what we are considering for next year, there is still much we found encouraging. [Our survey of students and parents who participated in these classes](#) indicates that, in spite of the many limitations on the courses placed by the pandemic and rapid planning, [their experience was mostly positive](#). Teachers of those classes also expressed a positive overall experience.

How do teachers teach a heterogeneous course effectively?

Just putting students all together in one class does not in and of itself make for a better learning experience. Effective heterogeneous instruction cannot just mean “teaching to the middle,” or else teachers risk overwhelming some students and failing to adequately challenge others. Nor can heterogeneous work just mean “more work for honors students.”

Instead teachers must develop clear expectations distinguishing honors and advanced level work and appropriate support for all students. The teachers will employ the principles of differentiation and universal design to provide multiple entry points to the curriculum and different pathways for demonstrating mastery

The theoretical underpinnings for successful heterogeneous instruction come from Universal Design For Learning, grounded in neuroscience of learning and articulated by David Rose and the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) as having curriculum, instruction and classroom management reflect the diversity of learning needs and styles of the students who occupy those spaces, specifically recognizing:

- Multiple means of representation (affording students many different ways of acquiring information and knowledge)
- Multiple means of expression (providing students many ways to demonstrate their learning)
- Multiple means of engagement (providing a variety of contexts to match student interests, lived experiences, etc. (Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014).

UDL undergirds the practice of differentiating curriculum and instruction to serve learners presenting with a variety of ability/readiness levels, and this differentiation can be coded, if need be, to represent, and even to reward with variable school credit, the difference between “standard” and “honors/accelerated” learning within the context of a single class (Nurenberg, 2016).

In the words of Sanborn Regional High School principal Brian Stack: “In a traditional high school, honors course work is defined by a course you take...[but] honors work can best be described as a product that shows that a student delved more deeply into methodology, structure, and/or theory; addressed more sophisticated questions; and satisfied more rigorous standards. The content of an honors assignment can be one of two things. The content is either broader in scope or deeper in examination than in a comparable assignment” (Stack in CASN, 2014, p.1)

[Resources on Differentiated Instruction](#)

[Resources on Universal Design for Learning](#)

How can AHS teachers possibly differentiate for such a wide range of student skill levels?

As it turns out, AHS doesn’t have that wide a range of student skill levels. The majority of students at AHS are high performing, with a consistent 80% pass range on English and Math MCAS, compared with an average 60% for the state, over the last three years. In 2017, 85% of AHS students performed in the top three levels on the PISA test administered by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – if AHS was a “nation,” nearly all of its students would be outperforming most of their global counterparts. The small number (single digits) of students per grade with exceptional special learning needs would still receive separate instruction in separate classes.

What other evidence do you have that AHS teachers can do this?

The genesis of the heterogeneous proposal actually came *from* the teachers – they were the ones who expressed their readiness, confidence and desire to embark upon these changes, and have been driving the process so far. In addition, the AHS administration has earmarked time and funding this spring and summer for additional professional development and training.

I heard from last year that differentiation just involved giving extra work to students taking classes for honors.

As mentioned, the implementation of heterogeneous grouping last year during the pandemic was constrained by a great number of factors, and does not represent our planned implementation next year. That last year's implementation, imperfect as it was, produced so many positive results, is remarkably encouraging. Next year's implementation will ensure that honors participation in heterogeneous classes involves *more complex learning*, not just *more work*.

Honors work would be characterized by higher levels of complexity and sophistication, not just greater quantity. Of course, in a writing assignment, a more complex argument may take more discussion and evidence, resulting in a longer paper. However, the emphasis is on the quality not quantity of the intellectual task. Clarifying our focus on more complex, higher level work will help us to improve the rigor and engagement of our classes for all students.

How will this affect students' transcripts for college admissions?

In the current proposal, and the way that we currently practice heterogeneous grouping, students still have the same Curriculum A or Honors designation on their transcript - nothing looks any different from what colleges can see.

In addition, college admissions officers are comfortable interpreting a wide variety of transcripts and grade formats. Admissions officers have explained to us that, as long as transcripts are clear, they don't have a preference for a particular course format.

Have other local, comparable schools to AHS implemented heterogeneous classes successfully?

Yes. Lexington High School, Cambridge Rindge and Latin, Boston Community Charter School, and Somerville High School, among others, have all implemented their own versions of this model. [You can watch a video of a recent panel](#) where teachers from these schools came to meet with and present to our HGI study group about their school model.

What about schools where this has backfired? How can AHS avoid such outcomes?

Every school has its own unique situation and conditions. You might find [this article](#) useful as a profile of some schools that did and did not experience success with heterogeneous grouping. In general, the conditions that make for successful implementation of heterogeneous grouping are:

1. A narrow to moderate range of student skill difference
2. Teachers who are skilled in differentiation
3. Clear and consistent expectations, communicated to students and families
4. Community support

At present, we are confident in items #1-3, and are working to involve and educate the community to bring about #4.

Importantly, we have heard that some school districts “tried this and it failed.” We have fact-checked these assertions and have not been able to confirm that any school district in the area has attempted this adjustment and found it unsuccessful. To the contrary, in all instances where schools in the area have collapsed levels, the change has lasted.

Notably, efforts are underway in multiple neighboring communities to pursue conversations about the impact of leveling on equity of outcomes and experience for all students. Arlington is not the first, and will not be the last, to pursue this adjustment. It is our goal to do so meaningfully, with input from the community, and with structures in place to support teachers through the adjustment.

How has the community been involved so far?

In early December, we formed a diverse study group of educators, parents, and students who have been meeting weekly to examine how our leveling practices can best support student engagement, achievement, inclusion, and equity. While the parents were drawn from those with students in grades 8-12, all levels of children are represented among their children, from K-12.

The group has met over 13 times to review research and feedback. A robust conversation and debate has led us to consensus on this proposal. It is this group that has developed and is presenting our current proposal and will be presenting it to the community.

We plan to hold 2 In-person Community Focus Groups and an online Community Forum in order to hear from stakeholders about their ideas, concerns, and questions about this proposal. Because there is widespread interest in this topic, we want to take the opportunity to ensure that the community understands and has input to make sure this decision best serves the interests of all students.

The intention of these focus groups is not to host a debate or tally a vote. Instead, they are designed to increase understanding of the curriculum and proposal, learn about your expectations for the curriculum at the High School, understand your hopes and concerns about the proposed pilot, and consider how we should measure success in providing an excellent and equitable education for all students.

How will we evaluate the success of the program?

Throughout the pilot next year we will continually assess student numbers and participation in honors level work, their academic performance, and measures of student engagement and class experience. We will examine effects across all academic levels and demographic groups. Our plans to continue or expand the pilot would depend upon positive outcomes from this data.

Our goal in this program is to improve student achievement and engagement for all students. As such, we would hope to see equal or improved outcomes in honors level participation, grades, student engagement and challenge, future enrollment in honors, and MCAS scores. Overall, we will be looking for results to be steady or improved across the honors and advanced levels and across demographic groups.

By April of 2023, we will look at initial results in order to determine whether to continue the pilot or expand it. This will be a holistic decision, based on input from teachers and students as well as the outcome data above. We will want to weigh the success of the pilot and the costs associated with going forward..

What else is Arlington High School doing to challenge students who are currently high-achieving?

AHS offers a challenging and rigorous curriculum to all students. Our advanced and honors curricula offer rigorous preparation for college and career after high school. We offer over 20 college level courses including programs that follow the College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) program and classes that are offered by Syracuse University. AHS ranks 10th in the state on the U.S. New World Report College Curriculum Breadth Index and 25th on their College Readiness Index.

Students have a wide range of opportunities for enrichment including participation in Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) which provide access to college level courses in any area of student or faculty interest. Students may also pursue internships and work study opportunities.

I still have questions.

Please feel free to email Dr. Janger at MJanger@arlington.k12.ma.us. You are also welcome to visit the [dedicated webpage of resources](#) for our work examining levelling at AHS.