

Your Questions Answered
May 6, 2008
Middle School Gifted/Enrichment

QUESTION:

What is the plan for addressing the needs of the gifted students in our middle schools? We seem to have a good plan for elementary school, with the Enrichment program, and for high school, with lots of opportunities to take advanced classes. However, in the middle schools, all I've seen available is 'Advanced Math'. That is great but math is just one subject and there are plenty of other ways a student may be gifted. I don't think we are serving this group as well as we could be. It seems like we are just letting them coast for 3 years. What do other great school systems do with their gifted middle school students?

I've asked this question several times to different faculty members. The teachers all tell me they think there is a void there too, but no one seems to know what to do next.

ANSWER:

Before we begin, it is worth mentioning that this issue was raised in an [HSCIN survey conducted in February 2007](#). Many of you mentioned that you were concerned about the level of academic challenge, especially at the middle school level. The Hoover News' Editor Jon Anderson discussed this in his column on March 21, 2007, interviewing Ron Dodson, Secondary Curriculum Director for Hoover City Schools, and Middle School Principals Joy Brown (Bumpus) and Carol Barber (then-Principal of Simmons, now Assistant Superintendent for Hoover City Schools).

At that time, many reasons were given, including “the philosophy in Hoover is to keep classes as heterogeneous as possible, not pulling out kids for high-track or low-track classes”, “middle school kids go through so many emotional changes that school officials don't want to lock them into tracks and close doors for them”, and “just because there aren't advanced classes in other subject areas doesn't mean those classes aren't rigorous. Teachers are trained to give individualized instruction based on students' ability and skill level”.

We've chosen to break this question down into four separate questions: (1) What, if anything, do our middle schools offer for our truly “gifted” children; (2) Why are there no Advanced classes, except for Math, at the middle school level; (3) What do other school systems do with their gifted students; (4) What do other school systems offer in the way of advanced courses for their middle school students.

QUESTION (1): What, if anything, do our middle schools offer for our Gifted Children?

At this point, Hoover City Schools follow the State Department of Education's criteria for identifying and educating Gifted Children. This is a distinction above and beyond a child needing an accelerated or advanced pace.

If your child has not previously been identified as Gifted (in elementary school, for example), and you believe your child is Gifted, you can have your child tested through Hoover City Schools' Special Education department. Gifted students are served by the Special Education department.

If your child tests as Gifted, a Gifted Education Plan (GEP) must be drafted and implemented. We often hear of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for special education students, but IEPs are also implemented for gifted students, we just call them GEPs. [For more information on GEPs, check out this link to the [State Department of Education's Gifted Education Page](#).] The GEP outlines exactly what services the school system should provide to accommodate the Gifted Child's needs, much in the way an IEP outlines the services that a child with Special Needs should be provided. Specific eligibility requirements are presented below.

This is important for Hoover City Schools right now only at the Elementary level, where Enrichment is offered to students who qualify. Each Enrichment teacher can be responsible for a total of no more than 45 students, with only 15 in each Enrichment class at each class session. Two Hoover elementary schools currently employ two Enrichment teachers because their population of students qualifying for enrichment exceeds 45.

In terms of how the school system is supposed to serve the students that earn the Gifted title, for the **middle school grades 6, 7, and 8**, the State Department recommends the mode of service (i.e., the way to give additional opportunities) "should be pull-out services including electives and enrichment clusters, and/or, advanced classes in the core content areas." (Source: [Gifted Code, section 290-8-9-.12 \(6\)\(c\)3 approved July 19, 2007.](#))

Currently, only Advanced Math is offered district-wide at each of Hoover's middle schools.

All of the above refers only to children who are actually tested and receive the label of "Gifted". In the elementary schools, Enrichment is offered to all children who meet certain criteria whether or not they are considered "Gifted".

QUESTION (2): Why are there no Advanced classes, except for Math, at the middle school level?

There have been various offerings of Advanced classes throughout Hoover City Schools' history at the middle school level, but currently the only Advanced course offered among all three middle schools is Advanced Math.

Hoover City Schools relies on Differentiated Instruction to allow for advanced work within the core content areas (other than Math). [Click here for information on Differentiated Instruction](#), developed from conversations with Dr. Deborah Camp, Elementary Curriculum Director for Hoover City Schools. Classroom teachers are directed to offer more challenging work to those students who need more of a challenge.

On a state level, Hoover City Schools' middle schools are participating in the State Department of Education's Alabama Middle School Initiative (AMSI) is a school improvement reform model based on the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW) Initiative. The purpose of the middle grades initiative is to develop, implement, evaluate, and refine a comprehensive, whole-school improvement effort that will help all middle grade students receive a high-quality, challenging, and appropriate education that prepares them for success in college-preparatory level courses in high school. Additional information about SREB and MMGW can be found at www.sreb.org. For additional information about the AMSI contact Dorothy Dolasky from the State Department at ddolasky@alsde.edu.

Hoover City Schools are currently reviewing their offerings for middle school students in the area of advanced and Gifted education, and will make changes as those discussions warrant. **You are strongly encouraged to share your concerns with your child's principal.** Be specific when discussing your child's needs and what might have been offered to make his school experience more challenging and enriching.

As to why there are no other current offerings of advanced classes, the answer we were given is that the advantages and disadvantages of homogeneous grouping (i.e., breaking out learners by ability groups) must be weighed carefully. "Research is mixed, but the consensus seems to be that homogeneous grouping generally yields good results for students at the high end of ability, but average and below average students do not fare so well. The conclusion has to be that this (homogeneous grouping) is a tool that we should wield cautiously. At the middle school level, we are generally even more cautious...because we want to leave the doors to subsequent advanced coursework open for as many students as possible for as long as possible. Adolescents are very capable of surprising us when we keep expectations high." [Thanks to Mr. Ron Dodson, Secondary Curriculum Director of Hoover City Schools, for providing us that answer.] Further, to pigeonhole students into "I can do advanced coursework" and "I can't do advanced coursework" at the middle school level might shut the door for children who are struggling to determine where they fit in the academic world.

Beginning in high school (the 9th grade), Hoover City Schools' high schools offer a wide range of advanced classes, now called "Pre-AP" classes, previously called "Honors" classes. You are strongly encouraged to investigate those offerings at the beginning of your child's 8th grade year to ensure your child is ready to take those advanced courses at their high school. Contact the Counselor at the 9th grade office of your child's high school to have this discussion. Make certain that the Counselor understands your concerns, if you believe your child has not been adequately challenged during their middle school years.

QUESTION (3): What do other school systems do with their gifted students?

Here's what we found:

Mountain Brook/Mountain Brook Junior High: There is no separate distinction for gifted students, but advanced classes are offered in the core content areas.

Homewood/Homewood Middle School: from their [website](#):

Two Enrichment teachers meet with 6th and 7th grade students at least twice a week for 45 minutes each. Students may attend Enrichment more than twice weekly provided they are caught up in class and grades are at least at "B" level.

Shelby County, from their [website](#):

Grades 6, 7 and 8 receive approximately 5 hours per week in a gifted education content class.

Middle School Gifted Education Services: At the middle school level, gifted ed. teachers teach gifted ed. literature courses for identified 6th-7th- 8th grade gifted students. A "Shelby County Middle School Gifted Ed. Curriculum Guide" was developed by a team of gifted ed. teachers to assure comparability in programming.

Shelby County offers a [web page of Parent Resources](#) as well.

Vestavia/Pizitz Middle School, from their [website](#):

"Students are placed in the Gifted Program through a referral process. A student may be referred by a parent, teacher, or a student may refer himself/herself. Referral can be sent to Guidance or directly to the teacher of Gifted Education.

6th and 7th grade: **Compacting**

During the academic year, Social Studies compacting tests are offered through the Gifted teachers for selected chapters. Compacting is a procedure designed to streamline the regular curriculum. Gifted students prepare to pretest independently. Each student will receive a calendar of test dates and chapters in advance. Any Gifted student showing a minimum of 90% mastery of a selected chapter (determined by the pretest grade) will report to the gifted room to begin work on a project related to the curriculum of the chapter from which he/she has compacted.

8th grade: Each year the Gifted Education program is tailored to meet the needs of the student. For 8th grade, students have a variety of in school electives from which to choose as well as extracurricular activities. Their specific gifted education needs are provided through the regular education curriculum. To further enhance the academic curriculum, 8th grade Gifted Education students can choose from the following:

- Two levels of Advanced Placement Math
- Advanced Placement English
- Junior United Nations Assembly (meets during homeroom)

Trussville/Hewitt-Trussville Middle School: From their [Gifted and Talented Brochure](#):

At Hewitt Trussville Middle School, gifted students may take a gifted class in one or more subject areas each year as well as honors classes. The state course of study is followed in the gifted class, but teachers also include enrichment which focuses on student interests. They follow various gifted models appropriate for their age group.

QUESTION (4): What do other school systems offer in the way of Advanced courses for their middle school students?

Mountain Brook/Mountain Brook Junior High: Advanced classes are offered in Math, Social Studies, Science and English.

Homewood/Homewood Middle School: No Advanced classes are listed. However, most all 8th graders are expected to take Algebra I, with only one teacher listed as teaching “Pre-Algebra”. Homewood Middle School does offer Enrichment for Gifted students.

Vestavia/Pizitz Middle School: French, German and Spanish are offered in the 7th and 8th grades. Only Advanced Math courses are listed for both grades, but Advanced English is listed for 8th grade as well.

Shelby County: The only advanced classes listed are Advanced Math courses in the 7th and 8th grades.

Trussville/Hewitt-Trussville Middle School: The only advanced classes listed are Advanced Math courses in the 7th and 8th grades. However, a counselor at the school indicated that Honors Classes are available in every core subject for 7th and 8th graders. Placement in these Honors Classes is based on specific criteria.