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November 4, 2011

Dear Parents/Guardians of 5th Grade Students:

One very important process that occurs during your child's 5th grade year is middle school course placement for Mathematics and Language Arts. The process to determine middle school placement for English and Humanities will begin in November. The middle school mathematics placement will begin April 9th, 2012. The placement processes support North Shore School District's Strategic Plan Objective of using NSSD assessments, consistent standards and a systematic process to ensure an appropriate level of support necessary for individual growth and academic rigor.

Two courses are offered at the middle school: English and Humanities. **The placement process is used to identify students who require a course two to three years above grade level and a replacement curriculum.**

The District 112 English course develops reading, writing, grammar and interpretive skills using a combination of whole class and independent novels, short stories, poetry, excerpts, nonfiction, etc. This class focuses on the reading-writing connection and is organized around overlapping themes. To foster the reading-writing connection, students will read for pleasure, understanding, personal growth, and use literature as a model for their own writing. Students will learn to clearly communicate ideas as well as appreciate the writing process by experimenting with narrative, expository, persuasive, poetry and letters. To encourage clarity of expression, students will additionally study language mechanics, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling.

Humanities is tailored for students with high academic skill levels as evidenced by testing data and classroom work. These students also exhibit well developed (several years above current age), highly sophisticated levels of analytical and abstract thinking and reasoning skills. These students are ready for a fast-paced, challenging, and rigorous work environment. Significant differentiation within the general education English classroom will not be sufficient to meet these specific needs. 6th grade Humanities class works towards mastery of 8th-9th grade English Language Arts Standards.

The English/Humanities Placement Process for 2011-12 will be open to all 5th grade students to determine students who require an above-grade level replacement curriculum. Parents may choose to opt-out of the above grade level testing process. [Click here to complete the online Opt-Out Form.](#)

The placement process involves two distinct components for interested students.

Phase I

- Gifted Teachers will gather fall and winter *Measures of Academic Progress Test (MAP)* data.
- Students take the 6th grade *Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT)*, verbal and non-verbal subtests. This test is an **above grade level test** scheduled for Monday, November 28th through Wednesday, November 30th, 2011 at their home school. All IEP and 504 testing accommodations will be implemented.
- Parents with participating students will receive a *Parent Review Form* in mid-November. This form

should be completed and returned to your classroom teacher by December 5th, 2011

- Data (CogAT and MAPs) will be gathered and applied to a Phase I Matrix, which will be reviewed by a District Review Team of Administrators and Elementary Gifted Teachers.
- Students whose data indicates a potential need for a replacement curriculum will progress onto Phase II. Parents will be notified by mail.

Phase II

- An above grade level literature unit will be taught two-three times per week, mid-January through March by the building Gifted teacher.
- Gifted Teachers will gather assessment data from the literature unit.
- Students will produce two authentic written essays that are collaboratively reviewed and blindly scored by Elementary Gifted and Middle School Humanities Teachers.
- Phase II data (Literature Unit and two essays) will be applied to a Phase II Matrix
- Each student's matrix will be individually reviewed by the team to determine appropriate placement.
- Placement decisions letters for Math and Language Arts will sent via mail to parents on May 4th, 2012.

There is a process in place for Middle School Placement Review, which occurs in December of 6th grade. Parents and teachers have an opportunity to recommend a child for Review. Additional data will be collected and reviewed by a District Level Review Team to determine if a change in placement is necessary.

Additional information, testing details and a Humanities' Student Profile can be viewed on the attached Frequently Asked Questions Page.

Please complete the online opt-out form no later than November 18 if you do not wish your child to participate in the above grade level Humanities placement process. Please contact your school's Gifted Teacher(s) with any questions.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Cardella

Learning Coordinator for Language Arts and Gifted Services
Department of Teaching, Learning and Technology
North Shore School District 112

Humanities Testing Opt Out Form

Student Name: _____ Date: _____

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Signature: _____

I do NOT give permission for my son/daughter to participate in the Humanities Placement Testing on November 28, 29, or 30th at their home school. My child will NOT participate in the Humanities Testing. Return to Gifted Teacher.

Frequently Asked Questions about Humanities Testing Process

How many English-Language Arts courses are offered at the Middle Schools?

North Shore School District offers two distinct Language Arts course offerings; English and Humanities.

What are the differences in the courses?

English develops reading, writing, grammar and interpretive skills using a combination of whole class and independent novels, short stories, poetry, excerpts, nonfiction etc. The focus of this English class is on the reading-writing connection and is organized around overlapping themes. To foster the reading-writing connection, students will read for pleasure, understanding, personal growth, and as inspiration and models for their own writing. Students will learn to clearly communicate ideas as well as appreciate the writing process by experimenting with narrative, expository, persuasive, poetry and letters. To encourage clarity of expression, students will study language mechanics, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling.

The Humanities course is a replacement curriculum designed for students who have mastered grade level standards and are performing two-three years above grade level. These students have high academic skill levels as evidenced by testing data and classroom work who also exhibit well developed (several years above current age), highly sophisticated levels of analytical and abstract thinking and reasoning skills. These students are ready for a fast-paced, challenging, and rigorous work environment. Significant differentiation within the general education English classroom is not sufficient to meet these specific needs. The 6th grade Humanities course works towards mastery of 8th grade standards.

What is a replacement curriculum?

A replacement curriculum is a different set of standards that a child will master in lieu of the grade level curriculum. A replacement curriculum is a research based strategy and part of curriculum compacting, which is a flexible, research-supported instructional technique for modifying the regular curriculum to meet the needs of high ability students. This technique is a form of content acceleration that enables high-ability students to skip work they already know and substitute more challenging content. The goals of compacting are to streamline work that may be mastered at a pace commensurate with the student's ability, create a challenging learning environment, guarantee proficiency in basic curriculum, and buy time for enrichment and acceleration (Reis and Renzulli, 1992). Students in the Humanities program have shown mastery in grade level content and require a replacement curriculum and activities to make adequate and appropriate growth.

What is the profile of a student who is ready for Humanities?

- Humanities students have a natural ability to see things differently than most--usually at a more sophisticated level than what other 6th grade learners exhibit--and they do so CONSISTENTLY, not just on occasion.
- Humanities students don't need as much repetition to learn a new concept or skill. In contrast, a high-achieving English student might be capable of similar material, but s/he will usually have to study much harder or require more time to do so.
- Humanities students need little prompting in order to draw meaningful, critical thinking connections between class material and the world around them. Higher-level English students will occasionally bring up such connections, but in most instances, this occurs only after the teacher has given hints or clues concerning the topic at hand--or they occur few and far between. Furthermore, Humanities students will exhibit such behaviors outside of school. They will offer comments that make those around them; parents included, say, "Wow! What an insightful notion--especially for someone his/her age!"
- Hard workers are not necessarily Humanities students; they may just be motivated students whose grades reflect their incredible work ethic. For example, some of students who demonstrate the most effort are those who are still trying to understand basic concepts. On the other side of that coin, some of the most talented Humanities students are minimalists to the maximum degree.
- An "A" grade in English often (usually) does not reflect mastery of content. Most teachers include homework, extra credit, participation, and other such grades in their record books, and these scores have a tendency to raise overall percentages--regardless of the student's success on formal assessments. In other words, an "A" grade does not necessarily show that a student understands the material; it shows they put forth strong effort.
- The questions, the pacing, and the complexity of the discussions are as different as night and day between English and Humanities classes. Humanities classes are conducted at a level beyond the literal nearly all the time. If literal or basic instruction is needed, a one-time explanation is usually enough, and the class can move on to more in-depth study or discussion.
- Humanities students are those who get things quickly, have insatiable curiosity, and ask challenging questions. These students need to be challenged daily in order to analyze, evaluate, justify, and synthesize information. They get connections. They make their

own connections. They are high-level critical thinkers who move at a very fast pace.

- There are two principal differences between Humanities and English: pacing and depth. The reason for this really boils down to two factors: ability of the student to learn with fewer repetitions and ability to think at a more complex level. In Humanities, we can examine far more material because once basic concepts are taught, the students can move to more in-depth examination of the same concepts or to different concepts. In addition, Humanities students thrive on complex concepts. They like to think about the questions with no answers. Sometimes when you try to take a regular class to a higher level of thinking, they become distracted, look away, fidget, and it requires again many repetitions of what you are trying to achieve to get them to think 'outside the box.'

What data is used to determine a child's placement in Humanities?

Phase I: November - December of 5th Grade

1. Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT): To assess students' abilities in reasoning and problem solving using verbal, quantitative, and nonverbal (spatial) symbols

The test measures both general and specific reasoning abilities. The general reasoning abilities reflect the overall efficiency of cognitive processes and strategies that enable individuals to learn new tasks and solve problems, especially in the absence of direct instruction. These abilities are assessed in three domains: verbal, quantitative, and nonverbal. Each is represented by two or three different reasoning tasks. Having multiple measures in each domain greatly increases the dependability of the score profile that is reported for each student. The Cognitive Abilities Test measures developed abilities, not innate abilities. The development of these abilities begins at birth and continues through early adulthood. It is influenced by both in-school and out-of-school experiences. Because these abilities are closely related to an individual's success in school in virtually all subjects, test results may be used in planning effective instructional programs. In combination with other relevant information about a student, scores can be used to adapt instruction in ways that enhance the student's chances of success in learning. North Shore School District 112 uses an out-of-level testing to increase reliability.

CogAT VERBAL BATTERY:

- Three subtests assess inductive and deductive reasoning skills.
- Subtests assess flexibility, fluency, and adaptability in working with verbal materials and solving verbal problems.
- Success on these subtests requires that students have a variety of verbal strategies that they can use effectively.
- These verbal reasoning abilities play an important role in developing skills in reading comprehension, critical thinking, writing, and other verbal learning tasks.

CogAT NONVERBAL BATTERY:

- Three subtests present novel problems for students.
- Items on these subtests use only geometric shapes and figures.
- Subtests require no reading and no outside fund of knowledge.
- To perform successfully, students must have well developed strategies for dealing with novel materials.
- Students must be flexible in using these strategies and accurate in implementing them.

2. Measures of Academic Progress (MAP): The MAP assessment present students with engaging, age-appropriate questions in the areas of Math and Reading. As a student responds to questions, the test responds to the student, adjusting up or down in difficulty. This assessment is administered 3 times a year for students in grades 3rd-8th grade. We will use MAP scores from the last two testing windows.

3. Qualitative Student Data: Parents complete a *Parent Review Form* to provide additional information regarding your child at home. Teachers complete a similar form and note student attributes and the demonstration frequency. These data are not given a quantitative value in the process but are referred to as additional information.

All data is applied to a Matrix, which is used to determine students who will participate in Phase II so that the Review Committee will collect more information to determine if a child will require a replacement curriculum.

Phase II: January - March of 5th Grade

1. Authentic, Analytical Writing Assessment :

Student will write essay on a "cold" prompt. A cold prompt is a prompt the student has not encountered prior to the writing assessment. The prompt is read to the student, and the scoring rubric is reviewed with the student prior to start of essay writing. The student must think about the prompt and independently write a critical and analytical response that addresses all parts of the prompt. Each student will have 40 minutes to complete a response. This piece is blindly scored by a team of Humanities' teachers.

Teachers of Humanities judge each essay on focus, originality, style, elaboration and order. Each essay criterion is judged

on a 3-point scale for a total of 15 points. To insure inter-rater reliability, middle school Humanities teachers representative of District 112 middle schools score the student's authentic writing assessment.

- **Focus:** The essay demonstrates an understanding of and addresses all parts of the prompt. The essay does not ramble into unnecessary details; it stays on topic.
- **Originality:** The essay shows evidence of creative and/or original thinking with regard to the prompt. Ideas presented are unusual or uncommon.
- **Style:** The essay shows facility with language and vocabulary.
- **Elaboration:** The essay builds into a basic idea of the prompt by adding details to show complexity. The essay is not just literal but gives reasons by providing insightful links with relevant ideas, global issues, and trends.
- **Order:** The essay is logical. It has a coherent beginning, middle, and end.

2. Literature Unit:

Students will participate in a literature unit that is taught by the Gifted and Talented Educator (GTE). This unit will simulate the pacing, depth and expectations of a Humanities class. Students will experience a variety of literature, activities, written responses and other assessment data that is applied to a rubric. One written piece is blindly graded by a team of Gifted teachers.