



Frequently Asked Questions

Q. How will Academic Excellence for All challenge students differently?

- All middle school students will receive their middle school's most rigorous curriculum.
- Our students will have more opportunities to collaborate and grow from interactions with diverse perspectives and voices as we prepare them to participate in a global workforce.
- Our teachers will meet the needs of diverse learners by differentiating instruction for students in heterogeneous classes. Curriculum will be differentiated according to student knowledge and skill. For example, in an English class, students can be studying the concept of point of view, at the same time working with the process of comprehension. Differentiation lies in the chosen texts within the classroom according to ability level to allow for all students to share in the concept of point of view. Additionally, discussion surrounding point of view is enhanced due to the different perspectives of each group.
- According to the College Board, differentiation offers multiple approaches to meeting learners' needs and is student-centered. Differentiated instruction does not equate to individualized lessons for each student; rather, it encourages flexible grouping and simultaneous activities (interest groups, stations or learning centers), in which students perform tasks that push them beyond their learning comfort zones.

Q. Will there be any specific changes at the individual middle schools?

- With the new academic expectations, it will no longer be necessary to apply for Pre-AP or IB-MYP courses, as all students will receive our most rigorous curriculum.

Q. How will this new direction benefit all students?

- Research cited by the College Board argues that "the rigor of the curriculum is the most significant predictor of academic success and postsecondary education completion." Both the College Board and International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program are committed to offering a rigorous curriculum for all students.
- According to education scholar John Hattie, every student with high-impact instruction can grow more than one academic year in a year's time. ("Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement," 2008) The results of more than 300 studies indicate tracking (putting students into separate "advanced" and "regular" classes) has minimal effects on learning, but has profound negative effects on creating an equitable environment for all learners. ("Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement," 2008).
- Other research consistent with the College Board suggests that enhancing curriculum for all students helps diminish behavior issues. Our own testing shows that when we gave all students access to the most challenging curriculum through the 9th-grade English courses at Armstrong, there was an increase in students achieving at the highest levels, as well as a reduction in behavioral referrals along with a systematic decrease in achievement gaps.

Q. What curriculum offerings will be available for students who require an even higher level of learning?

- Opportunities will exist for advanced learners. Research by Renzulli and Reis out of the University of Connecticut shows that when all students are exposed to enrichment opportunities, all students benefit. In addition, there will be enrichment options and opportunities for students that will allow them to broaden or deepen their learning on a particular topic.

Q. When did the district decide to do this?

- This is a continuation of work set out in Goal One of our Unified District Vision, which aims to implement policies and practices that open pathways to academic excellence for all students. The vision was adopted in 2014. The steering committee that developed this plan received input from teachers, students, district administrators, community members and school board members.

Q. What sort of training are the teachers getting?

- The teacher training is related to the frameworks of International Baccalaureate-Middle Years Program (IB-MYP) at Robbinsdale Middle School and aligns to the state standards and the tenants of the International Baccalaureate. At Plymouth, training is aligned to the state standards and the skills necessary for success in Advanced Placement. We are planning a Middle School Institute this summer to support middle school teachers with continued professional development in mapping curriculum to the state standards and research-based best practice instruction and differentiation. This will build off the professional learning from the Science Museum of Minnesota Science House and AVID.

Q. When will Sandburg re-open as a middle school?

- This middle school will open during the 2017-18 school year. The Middle School Task Force is exploring the options for the configuration and timelines relating to the school.

Q. What is the difference between “rigor” and “content?”

- **Rigor** involves creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn content at high levels, each student is supported so he or she can learn content at high levels, and each student demonstrates learning the content at high levels.
- **Content** is what is taught to students and is determined by state or national standards, depending on the content area.

Q. How are these classes different than the “normal” curriculum?

- The most academically rigorous curriculum we currently offer will become the expectation. Classes will have enhanced, measurable academic rigor and higher expectations, with a goal of offering academic excellence for all students.

Q. What about summer homework?

- We are exploring ways to make summer homework accessible to all students. The Middle School Task Force will make recommendations to shape this effort.

Q. Will the size of each middle school decrease?

- When Sandburg is opened in fall 2017, enrollment at Plymouth and Robbinsdale middle schools will decrease by approximately 300 students and the enrollment at Sandburg is expected to be about 600 students.

Q. How will this impact kids with IEPs?

- Students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) will receive programming as defined by their IEP.

Q. What makes you think that all kids can handle increased academic rigor?

- The College Board strongly believes that all students should have access to rigorous curriculum. At the middle school level, exploration is a key component of growth in the academic and career realms. Offering our most rigorous curriculum for all students does not prematurely dismiss a student's potential, and allows all students the opportunity to become ready for high school, based on their own capabilities.

Q. How will you handle behavior issues?

- Research shows that having a challenging and engaging curriculum reduces behavior issues. For students that are not ready to engage appropriately in this environment, we have a structured intervention plan. For those students who still do not respond appropriately, there will be a building-wide protocol for response that supports teachers, and includes parents. When Armstrong High School detracked the entire 9th grade English at Armstrong, discipline improved, with only one single office discipline referral for the entire year. Also worth noting; the other courses did not de-track and their discipline referral rates held constant during the same timeframe.

Q. Are you taking away Advanced Placement preparation classes/curriculum at the middle school?

- The intent of the former Pre-AP program was to increase rigor for students. As a result of Academic Excellence for All, we are making this curriculum available for all students, in line with the suggestions of the College Board.
- According to College Board, AP preparation is based on "the expectation that all students can perform well at rigorous academic levels. This expectation should be reflected in curriculum and instruction throughout the school such that all students are consistently being challenged to expand their knowledge and skills to the next level."

Q. Will my student still receive an Advanced Placement preparation distinction on their transcript?

- The former Pre-AP distinction is not recognized by the College Board or by other districts. Students who excel beyond average are distinguished through grades, tests scores, and special distinctions received at the individual school.

Q. What's next, and how can I learn more?

- There will be school-specific meetings at Robbinsdale Middle School on Wednesday, Feb. 17, and at Plymouth Middle School on Monday, Feb. 22, 2016.