Making course choices in American public schools

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Role of electives in secondary schools

- Starting in middle school (grade 6, age 12) most public schools allow students to select 1-2 elective courses per year in addition to the required core courses
- In high school the number of elective courses increases depending on student level and could double the number of required core courses by 11th – 12th grades.
- School guidance counselors facilitate course scheduling and guide students to select courses based on their personal and career interests, aspirations and abilities.

Example – West Windsor Plainsboro Regional School District, Central New Jersey

- Serves diverse suburban communities of approximately 50,000 residents.
- Ten district schools serve 10,000 students: 4 lower elementary for students in grades K – 3, two upper elementary for students in grades 4 and 5, two middle schools (grades 6-8) and two high schools (grades 9 – 12)
- Each day includes 9 periods of classes (including 1 period lunch)
- Each class meets 4 days per week for one academic hour

Middle school core requirements

- English Language Arts (reading, writing, literature)
- Social Studies (history, geography)
- Mathematics (from arithmetic to algebra)
- Science (integrated)
- World language (choices: Chinese, French, German, Hindi and Spanish)
- Cycle courses (art, computer, health, life skills, music, and technology)
- Physical Education

Middle school electives

- Art (Grades 7 & 8)
- Band (Grades 6, 7, 8)
- Broadcast Journalism (Grade 7)
- Choir (Grades 6, 7, 8)
- Communication Arts (Grade 6)
- Computer Applications (Grade 7)
- Computer Graphics (Grade 8)
- Computer Programming (Grade 8)
- Creative Baking and Cooking (Grade 8)
- Creative Woodworking (Grades 7 & 8)
- Exploring Design and Engineering (Grades 7 & 8)
- Foods Around the World (Grade 8)
- Orchestra (Grades 6, 7, 8)
- Performing Arts (Grades 7 & 8)
- Television Production (Grade 8)
- Writing for the Real World (Grade 8)

High school general requirements

Scheduling

- Student should be scheduled for minimum of 30 credits per year.
- Within the school day, students should be scheduled for seven classes and a study hall.

Graduation

- Earn a minimum of 120 credits (each full year course that meets routinely for one non-extended class period is 5 credits)
- Language Arts Literacy - at least 20 credits
- American History- at least 10 credits
- World History - at least 5 credits
- Science - at least 15 credits
- Mathematics - at least 15 credits including algebra I and geometry
- Health, Safety, and Physical Education- at least 5 credits for each year
- Visual and Performing Arts - at least 5 credits
- Life, and Careers or Vocational Technical Education - at least 5 credits
- World Languages - at least 10 credits or student demonstration of proficiency
- Financial, Economic, Business, and Entrepreneurial Literacy - at least 2.5 credits
- Technological Literacy - integrated throughout the curriculum

Language Arts (20 credits) - must include a regularly scheduled writing component

- Grade 9 – 10: required Language Arts course at regular or honors level
- Grade 11: AP Language & Composition or required Language Arts course at regular or honors level
- Grade 12: AP Literature & Composition or AP Language & Composition or two semester classes from the electives list to the right:

- Art of the Essay
- Politics & Government in Literature
- Rebellion & Conformity
- Passport to World Literature
- Gender Roles in Literature
- Monsters in Literature
- Search for Self in Literature
- Shakespeare
- Art of the Short Story
- Art of Poetry

Social studies (15 credits) – must include five credits in world history and integration of civics, economics, geography and global content in all course offerings

- Grade 9: World History (regular or honors)
- Grades 10 – 11: American Studies (regular or honors)

Electives:

- International Business & Culture (grades 10-12)
- Human Behavior (Grades 11-12)
- Legal & Political Experiences (grades 11-12)
- Economics/Social Problems (grades 11-12)
- Multicultural Studies (Grades 11-12)
- AP United States History (Grades 11-12)
- AP European History (Grades 11-12)
- AP American Government & Comparative Politics (Grades 11-12)

Science (15 credits) - at least 5 credits in laboratory biology/life science, one additional laboratory/inquiry-based course in chemistry, environmental science or physics.

- Biology (grades 9-10)
- Conceptual physics (grades 9-10)
- Environmental Science (grades 9-12)
- Chemistry (grades 10 – 12)
- Physics (grades 10-12)
- Meteorology (Grades 11-12)
- Oceanography (Grades 11-12)
- Descriptive Astronomy (Grades 11-12)
- Human Anatomy & Physiology (grades 11-12)
- Genetics (Grades 11-12)
- Forensic Sciences (grades 11-12)
- AP Biology (grades 11-12)
- AP Chemistry (grades 11-12)
- Advanced Topics in Physics (grade 12)

Mathematics (15 credits) - including algebra 1 and geometry and a third year of mathematics

Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
Algebra 1	Basic Geometry	Algebra 2	Algebra & Trigonometry
Basic Geometry	Algebra 2	Algebra & Trigonometry	Pre-calculus
Geometry	Advanced Algebra 2	Pre-calculus	Calculus Honors
Geometry Honors	Advanced Algebra 2 Honors	Pre-calculus Honors	AP Calculus AB
Geometry Honors Accelerated	Pre-calculus Honors Accelerated	AP Calculus BC	Multivariable calculus

Mathematics elective: Statistics (or AP Statistics)

Visual and Performing Arts (5 credits) - must include the creation of a portfolio, including multiple works of art / music

- Art Foundation
- Drawing
- Painting
- Ceramics
- Sculpture
- Photography
- Advanced Placement Studio Art
- Advanced Placement Art History
- Graphic Computer Applications

- Music Theory
- Chorale
- Concert Choir
- Concert Band
- String Ensemble
- Symphony Orchestra
- TV Production
- Speech/Drama
- Dramatic Arts

Life, and Careers or Vocational Technical Education (5 credits)

- Accounting
- Computer Applications
- Digital Media
- Computer Programming
- Consumer Economics
- Culinary Arts
- International Foods
- Creative Cooking & Catering
- Fundamentals of Sports Medicine
- Child Growth & Development
- Youth Teaching Youth
- Broadcast Writing
- Advanced Broadcast Writing
- TV Production
- Journalism
- Fashion Strategies

World Languages (10 credits) - must include a regularly scheduled speaking component

Examples of courses in a foreign language

- Spanish Language & Cultural Study
- Spanish for Heritage Speakers
- Spanish 1 – 5
- Conversations in Spanish
- AP Spanish
- AP Spanish Literature

Additional world languages:

- French 1 – 5 and AP
- German 1 – 5 and AP
- Chinese 1 – 5 and AP

Elective:

- Latin 3 – 4

Additional academic programs for 11-12th grade students

- Independent study
  - is available for students who are looking for an additional academic opportunity for in-depth study beyond the school course offerings or have a desire to fulfill a course need that is not available in the current school curriculum
- Princeton University Course
  - High school students may apply for courses in mathematics, biology, physics, chemistry, foreign languages, computer science and music (when special talent can be demonstrated)
- Student Research in the Humanities
- Student Research in the Sciences
  - provides opportunities for students to design and implement original research projects under the guidance of a faculty mentor. Students are expected to perform literature searches, analyze published research articles, develop relevant and testable questions, consult experts in their field of study, design and carry out research plans and analyze results.

Senior Option Program

- This program provides an opportunity for eligible seniors to spend a portion of their last semester of high school in professional internships with local companies or in service learning experiences.
- The following requirements are part of the student's responsibilities:
  - A weekly journal outlining the activities of the past week. (This may be submitted by either print or electronically).
  - A culminating presentation at the end of the internship documenting the practices observed and learned; an assessment of this career pathway for future interns; and an evaluation of the experience.
  - Attendance at a seminar every Friday at the high school for group interaction, and a series of discussions on a variety of professional practices.