

Town Hall Question and Answer Recap

The following is a recap of some questions asked and answered at the chili chowdown/town hall meeting on Tuesday night, January 26, as answered by Jim Gaither.

How can we challenge M/S kids who are advanced in their math skills? We seem to do a dis-service to kids who are sharp in math, and could be doing higher level faster paced math classes.

I believe this question contains some misperceptions. The first is that we don't do higher-level math courses. The majority of middle school students at Woods take the advanced or enriched track in math, and are on course for geometry in their freshman year. This would be a sophomore course for most students. Anyone taking calculus in their junior year is still on track for any sort of math/science/engineering track at any sort of elite university.

The second misperception is that pushing a student into higher-level, faster-paced math classes is necessarily a good thing. Many high school teachers have expressed that too many students are rushed through math courses, so that when they get to high school, they don't have a solid mathematical foundation of understanding necessary for good work in those courses. This has become enough of a problem at Kelly Walsh High School that they have added very strict entry requirements for their math courses with an emphasis on test scores just to discourage the pressure to prematurely advance students.

Many students feel that they are not challenged if they do not advance quickly through the material (or more quickly than their peers). However, to gain a very solid mathematical foundation, their challenge is rather to achieve depth of understanding of the material. Many students who say they are not challenged have been unwilling to take the time to demonstrate advanced proficiency in the material being taught, and to make that depth their challenge rather than the total number of units or concepts passed. The "advanced proficient" descriptor at Woods is there to create the ability to be recognized for extending the material deeper than expected. It is always a challenge given to students to earn an AP in math.

Exceptions for individual cases are always made and recognized. A very few students have clearly qualified to take geometry in eighth grade because they do possess that advanced proficiency in all the prerequisite course standards, have no gaps in their knowledge of foundational concepts, and have a great deal of independence and maturity. The advent of online high school courses in our state available to our district students has allowed this advance coursework to happen during our math course time at Woods as of this year.

Lastly, I would point out that although I take test scores as only one indication of a program's success, Woods is the only "excelling" middle level school in math as recognized by our school district. I say this only to support my belief that we are meeting the math needs of all our students and their diverse abilities.

Also, my senior states that WLC should do a better job teaching basic grammar and spelling. He feels his skills are weak in this area.

Again I feel there is some misperception in this comment. Some students will always struggle more with grammar and spelling than others. Because of differences in abilities, not everyone who goes to Woods will leave with the same skills. I would argue that we do take these skills seriously and that most students do leave Woods with good grammar and spelling skills.

Over the past years, Woods, as a K-8 program, has implemented a new approach to spelling. What our own observations, as well as education researchers, have shown is that random word spelling tests do not make good spellers. We now have a more systematic approach to spelling that has improved the performance of our students in general. There still are, however, those students who will always struggle with spelling even as adults, and we hope that they also leave Woods with the ability to use all the tools available to them to compensate for this difficulty.

As for grammar, our approach as a school is to use grammar as a tool for good writing and speaking. Again, as with spelling tests, grammar drills do not make skilled communicators who will necessarily apply those concepts. However, good grammar is indeed a part of effective communication, and using the writing process to reinforce such concepts as using complete sentences, proper verb tenses, and subject/verb agreement has always been part of our curriculum.

In the middle school, we do make an effort to give eighth graders enough of a background in the language of grammar to help them through high school courses to come. Much of English grammar is actually taught in French class. Students have to have an understanding of the structure of English if they are to understand the differences in the structure of French and be able to talk about them and apply them. A student who leaves Woods should have a very solid understanding from French class of concepts that apply to English such as parts of speech, verb tense, verb conjugation, and so on.

So, our students may not have the sort of grammar drills and worksheets that other students have had. We do believe that our curriculum more than compensates for missing them, and that a student's time is better spent on some of the many other things we offer that other schools don't. The next question was a follow-up:

How do Woods students transition into high school?

Generally very well. Many former students tell us that the work they do in 9th grade is "easier" than what they were expected to do here in 8th grade. It does always depend on the individual, however. We do believe that the environment here creates expectations of leadership and maturity that give a student the tools to succeed in any other environment. Earning traditional grades has never been a problem for a student who is self-motivated.

Sometimes students feel self-conscious that they are lacking background that the majority of their classmates have had, and I will relate this to the question on grammar. A student at Woods has indeed "done" a lot of grammar, but it just looks different than what someone from another school has done. An adolescent is often more aware of what they perceive to be a deficiency than to be aware of the gifts they possess. I would hope that if they thought more about their ability to speak, to write and to research, and to look at what really matters in the post-academic world, that they would feel more confident about their education at Woods.

How does Woods fit in the "Pathway to 2025"?

We believe firmly that Woods provides a solid foundation for any student's future, as well as any sort of career path. We are constantly looking to improve our performance. Your feedback and suggestions are always important to us. If you like what you have with Woods and with school choice, you should let people know about your support so that we will continue to have the opportunity to have such a school. Thank you for taking the time to read this note!