

January 19, 2021

Dear FHSD teacher,

A focus that the Francis Howell School District's Academic Team has had during the 2020 – 2021 school year has been to analyze and address the achievement gap that exists in many of our underrepresented groups of students. A close examination of middle school students accessing Challenge and Pre-AP courses highlighted a large disparity between students in underrepresented groups and those not in those groups participating in these courses. Current research suggests that removing challenge courses at the middle school level allows underrepresented students to participate in more rigorous coursework and instruction, as well as, be exposed to higher caliber discussions in the classroom. In addition, most middle school models in other local benchmark school districts do not include a challenge pathway during middle school.

During the first semester, focus groups were convened to discuss both the advantages and disadvantages of removing Challenge courses at the middle school level. Focus groups occurred with the following stakeholders: English Language Arts teachers, mathematics teachers, social studies teachers, counselors, parent/community members and district middle school administrators. The feedback from all groups was consensus to remove challenge courses at the middle school level. The feedback was shared with Academic Team and Full Cabinet. The Academic Team spent multiple weeks discussing the benefits for all students, unintentional implications for all students, and supports that will be needed by teachers and administrators to make an effective transition. After many discussions the decision was made to eliminate challenge courses at the middle school level. Starting in the fall of 2021, middle schools in Francis Howell will no longer offer Challenge Math 6, Pre-AP ELA 6, and Pre-AP US History 8. Pre-AP ELA 7 will be eliminated during the 2022 – 2023 school year. Pre-AP ELA 8 will be eliminated during the 2023 – 2024 school year. When challenge courses are eliminated, the challenge-level curriculum will become the default curriculum in each remaining course.

The Academic Team recognizes that teachers will need ongoing support and professional development to effectively implement this change. Plans are being developed to ensure this support is available. Our goal is to make sure all students, regardless of background, have access to rigorous curriculum and instruction.

Please reach out to your building administrators or the Academic Team if you have any questions. Thank you for all of your efforts to make Francis Howell an inclusive environment for all to learn.



David Brothers
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Francis Howell School District