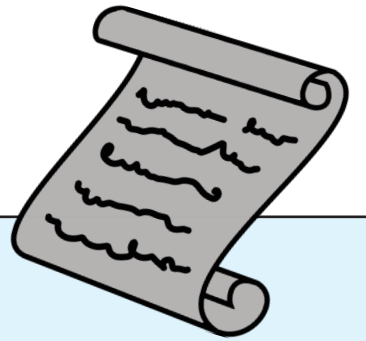
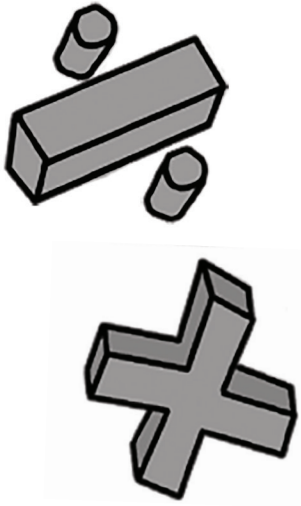


Departments deliberate introduction of unlevelled classes

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What's happening?

Starting next year, all freshmen at the high school will take a newly designed, unlevelled world history course, the first of its kind to be completely heterogeneous.

While a few introductory world language courses are unlevelled, nearly all freshman courses are currently separated into a range of levels, depending on the subject. Course leveling is new to 9th graders in their transition from unlevelled middle school classes.

In recent years, there has been concern about the leveling system and its implications on the success of all students. A majority of these considerations stem from the quantifiable stratification of students by race, class and gender within levels.

While each subject area has its unique situation, all departments have thoroughly considered potential releveling or curriculum changes.

Social Studies

The social studies department will be the first to introduce an entirely unlevelled freshman course, World History: Identity, Status and Power (WHISP). This course, which will be taken at Old Lincoln School, replaces the current Pre-Modern World History honors and standard courses.

Thematic and project-based, this new course is driven by answering compelling questions within history, rather than merely covering content, according to Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator Gary Shiffman.

"The course is designed to engage students in big questions, like how humans live together, who gets power and why, how it's justified, how society ranks their members and wealth and how it's distributed," Shiffman said. "Each quarter, we'll take one question and we'll do

case studies on how societies grapple with these themes."

A team of teachers, including social studies teacher Stephanie McAllister, has worked for the past few years to redesign the course into one that is more hands-on, combining elements of traditional teaching with student-driven learning.

"There are four big units that are organized around four big questions. For each of those questions, there are content areas and there is a project that enables students to take some of the things they've learned and develop it more on their own," McAllister said.

The impetus to develop a new course came from examining data behind the current leveling breakdown of freshman social studies classes. The department observed a stratification of African-American and Latino students that seemed to

persist throughout students' social studies pathway, according to McAllister.

"As soon as you start looking at the breakdown of our



honors and standard classes, 70 percent of freshmen are in honors. That doesn't really suggest it's an honors class," McAllister said. "We also found that stu-

dents who got placed in standard tended to stay in standard, and that predictive nature totally tended to break down around race. We really did not like how if you are placed in a standard class as a freshman, the likelihood that you stay in standard is higher."

The concept of a heterogeneous class is not new — during the process of designing the course, social studies teachers visited various schools, including Lexington High School, that use an unlevelled model for social studies.

According to McAllister, the new course, while being accessible and engaging to all students, will provide challenging extensions and supplements to core content.

"The biggest thing with an unlevelled class is creating what we tend to call a low floor and a high ceiling," McAllister said.

"You want to have a low floor for all of your materials and ideas so all students can get in there, but you also want to have a high ceiling so that if students want to push and challenge themselves, they can go and go and go up."

For now, this unlevelled model will only apply to the freshman social studies course, as successive courses in 10th, 11th and 12th grade are geared toward more in-depth learning, according to Shiffman.

"I think it becomes more difficult to unlevel as you go on because you are starting to specialize," Shiffman said. "You need to be able to go faster in your field, and at some point, you need access to specialized learning. The kids for whom the study of human society is a particular interest, I think we need to open the gateway for them to go faster."

Science

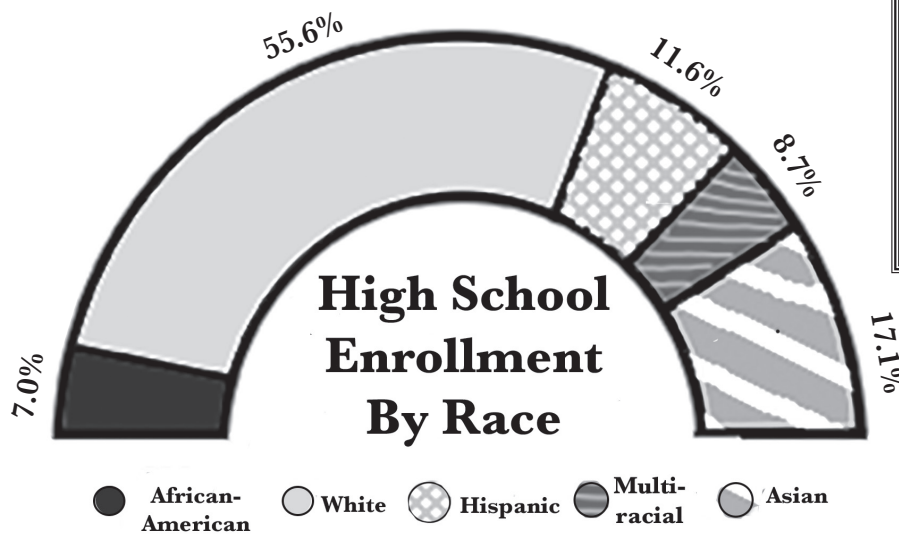
In the midst of the transition to a new building for freshmen, the science department will also be reworking the freshman physics course.

The department recently received a grant from the Brookline High School Innovation Fund for three teachers, including science teacher Julia Mangan, to have time in their schedules to work collaboratively on developing a project-based class.

Currently, introductory physics is divided into two levels: Physics I and Physics I Honors. According to Mangan, the revamped course will still maintain these levels, but it will be more experiential and allow for greater creativity.

"We absolutely believe that project-based learning could be great for everyone because projects tend to be really open-ended. They can create abilities for top students to go up, and for students for whom the student hat doesn't fit very well to be more engaged and interested in this type of learning," Mangan said. "Students are going through experiences which lead them to a better and deeper understanding of the world."

Mangan said that teachers will spend the upcoming school year developing the course, which will then be implemented in half of the freshman physics classes the following year. The 2021-2022 school year will see a full transition to the remodeled course.



The Brookline High School enrollment data by race is from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education School District Profiles for the 2017-2018 school year.



World Language

As of now, the world language department will not be altering the leveling of courses.

There are currently, however, a myriad of leveling systems for world language classes. For example, all beginning classes, such as French I and Chinese I, are unlevelled. For Chinese, Latin and Japanese, the courses continue with standard and honors classes. Other languages, including Spanish and French, also include an advanced level.

However, according to World Language Curriculum Coordinator

Agnès Albérola, after much deliberation, the department came to the conclusion that introducing more unlevelled classes would not benefit the majority of students.

"What happens in unleveling languages is that some students tend to stop talking because they feel embarrassed, they feel like they're not capable. Other students who are very advanced in their language feel frustrated that they have to keep waiting and helping," Albérola said. "I think language, because it's a cumulative subject area, does not lend itself well

to completely unleveling."

Given the cumulative nature of learning a language, Albérola believes that unifying the amount of experience students have in both elementary and middle school will help to lessen the divide between levels in high school.

"If I wanted to change something, I would make sure that everybody gets the same amount of instruction before so when they arrive at the high school, there's less of a gap between people's proficiency in a language," Albérola said.

ENROLLMENT IN ENGLISH AND MATH CLASSES BY RACIAL IDENTITY

Math

The course enrollment data was compiled in the Public Schools of Brookline Data Report for grade level outcomes by race and ethnicity for the 2016-2017 school year.

While there is no definite time frame for changes to freshman math leveling, the math department is examining the current leveling system and its effects on the achievements of all students.

According to Math Curriculum Coordinator Josh Paris, evaluating the breakdown of levels, which include co-taught, standard, honors and advanced, will help to ensure that all students can achieve success as they progress through high school.

“I think that in the math department, we are very successful with a vast majority of students, and yet I don’t think we’re successful with all students. I think we could do a better job at teaching all students,” Paris said. “There seems to be something systematic in how we level students coming out of 8th grade that is preventing all students from being as successful as they can be.”

Changes to the current leveling system will have its challenges, especially in trying to strike a balance between maintaining opportunities for advanced learning while making them available to all students.

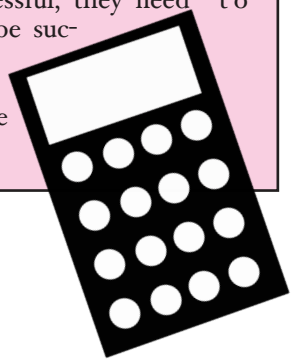
“What we know is that a vast majority of students are successful in their

courses and end up taking high level math courses and doing very well,” Paris said. “Any changes that we make, we have to make sure that those students are just as successful and have just as many possibilities while also providing more access to students who are not taking them.”

In perspective, the push toward equity in the math department has been long-standing — about a decade ago, the department started the Math Center and the Calculus Project, both of which aim to support students who may not have the resources to achieve their full potential.

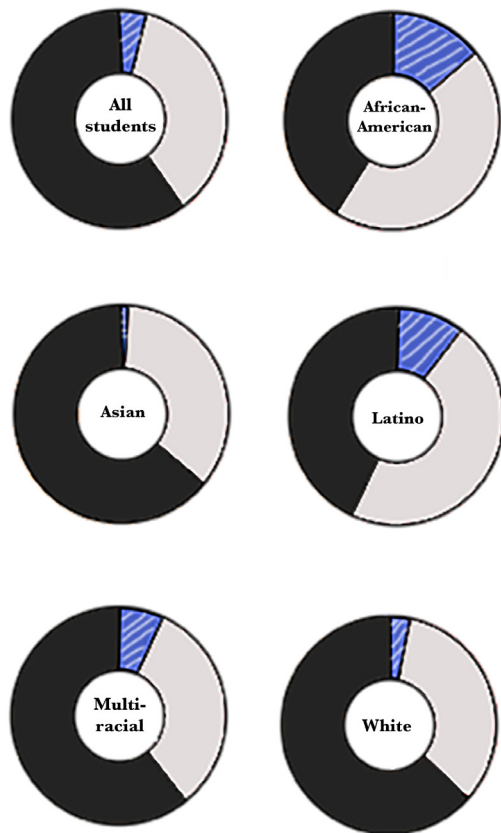
According to Paris, the math department strives to create an environment in which students are able to develop and remain steadfast in a growth mindset.

“A few years ago, a book came out about growth mindset,” Paris said. “It’s something we’ve always believed, but it brought it to the forefront of our thinking, which is that in order for students to be successful, they need to believe they can be successful through hard work, not through an innate ability.”



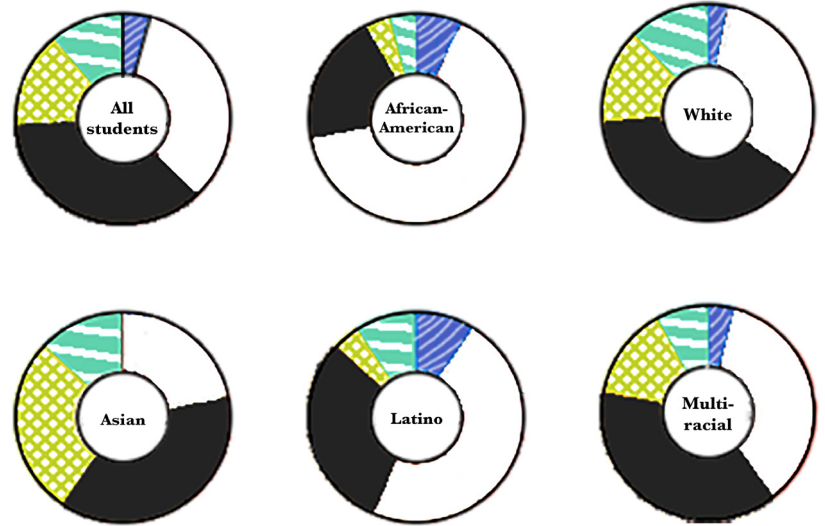
English Course Enrollment at the High School

- Co-Taught
- Standard
- Honors



Math Course Enrollment at the High School

- Co-Taught
- Standard
- Honors
- Advanced
- AP



English

Although the English department will not be modifying its two freshman courses, Responding to Literature and Responding to Literature Honors, there has been deliberation over potential leveling changes.

Over the course of last year and this past summer, a committee of six English teachers met to explore the leveling system. While the committee did not reach an agreement for future action, the discussions illuminated stratifications within freshman classes, according to English teacher Jennifer Rose-Wood.

“For many years, many of us have noticed that our classes are demographically segregated,” Rose-Wood said. “For example, we have more boys in standard and more girls in honors. We have more non-native speakers of English in standard and fewer non-native speakers in honors.”

The committee members represented a wide spectrum of opinions on leveling. According to English Curriculum Coordinator Mary Burchenal, it would be difficult to introduce a new model without a strong consensus within the department.

“Some people feel like anything’s got to be better than what we’re doing now and that we should try something new,” Burchenal said. “Other people feel like we have no evidence that that’s

going to work.”

English teacher Sophie Gorlin believes that, inherently, leveled classes serve students well in high school.

“I think that high school is a time to figure out your interests and your strengths,” Gorlin said. “I think in some ways, having leveled options helps you figure out if you really want to devote a lot of time to that subject area.

However, Gorlin acknowledges that some students may be misplaced in certain levels, which detracts from the benefits of this model.

“I think students will elect to take honors because of parental pressure or because of their peer group,” Gorlin said.

On the other hand, Rose-Wood believes that levels can have an adverse impact on both students’ motivation in school and their learning environment.

“Students really internalize ideas about who they are as students and what their academic potential is based on the messages they receive from the people around them and their community, their parents, their teachers, their peers,” Rose-Wood said. “Even just the sound of the name honors has positive

connotations. It sounds like an award. While standard doesn’t immediately seem negative, it doesn’t have those glowing connotations of specialness.”

For Rose-Wood, having an unlevveled or mixed-leveled class would introduce new ways for students to develop and share their ideas.

“There have been studies that show when you have a broader variety of students in a room, people are pushed. For example, you can’t assume that what

you’re thinking is going to be the way that the other people in class are thinking or that they’re going to agree with you, so you have to more fully develop your own thinking” Rose-Wood said.

Currently, the department is focusing its efforts on solidifying the scope and sequence of the English curriculum for all four years of high school.

“We’re working on what we want each grade to look like and how that builds off of the previous grade,” Gorlin said. “We’re thinking about how those courses fit into the overall curriculum and if we should adjust those courses a little bit.”

Nevertheless, the English curriculum at the high school has evolved alongside the growing presence of online resources and social media, according to Burchenal.

“In a world where books feel sidelined in some ways, English teachers have this struggle — do we go along with the way culture is going or do we fight against it?” Burchenal said. “We want kids to love to read. If they love to read, they will read. If they will read, they’re going to get better as readers and as writers. We started emphasizing building a reading culture and doing more to get kids engaged in reading, like using high interest books and changing our core books to try to represent a wider variety of lives.”

