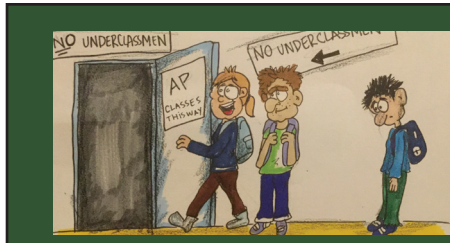


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## Class levels determined by more than just placement tests

### Teacher, parent, and self-evaluations also contribute to level recommendations

by Molly George

The process of placing incoming freshmen into different levels of classes goes beyond the December placement test, which causes varying levels of stress for 8th graders.

The placement test for the incoming class of 2023 was held Saturday, Nov. 17 for some middle schools (Sunset Ridge, Central, Washburne, and other students) and Saturday, Dec. 1 for the rest (Marie Murphy, Joseph Sears, and Wilmette Junior High).

"The placement exam is only one of the tools that we use to recommend classes for incoming students at New Trier," said Eighth Grade Transition Coordinator Lori Worth.

"It is an effective way to assess our students' skills in the basic areas, but we use several other methods to place students."

Freshman Rosie Winter reflected, "The placement test seemed like no big deal, but I feel like it actually corresponds really well to the classes I'm in."

In addition to the placement test, New Trier collects responses from junior high school teachers about students' performance in junior high.

Worth explained, "They

comment on critical thinking skills, class participation, homework completion, interpersonal skills, writing skills, independent learning ability, analytical skills and many more valuable learning aptitudes."

Assistant Principal of the Northfield campus, Gail Gamrath, added that these detailed evaluations about students are all carefully considered in the placement process.

Additional evaluation includes a self-evaluation and a short general essay from the 8th graders, as well as a parent survey of their students' strengths and weaknesses and key concerns, Worth said.

A common concern among parents and students, Gamrath said, is that the placement test does not reflect a student's entire schedule and ability to balance all of his or her academic classes along with electives and extracurriculars.

This is why, Gamrath said, course decisions involve "conversations with parents about whether it's okay that their kids are struggling, if they want them to be challenged, if it's okay if they take a risk and get a C even when they might have to work really hard to maintain their grade."

Recently, Gamrath observed, parents have been moving students down a level from their recommendations rather than pushing them to take higher level with awareness of the "race to nowhere" theory.

Instead of parents pushing their kids or students pushing themselves,

which Gamrath said happens often in this community, "they're being realistic about what they can take on — there's only so much you can do before you can't do anything well."

Gamrath also emphasized that students "shouldn't be stretching themselves in all core academics."

The makeup of a student's high school schedule, Gamrath said, depends on what kind of high school student they will be.

"It doesn't have to be so absolute. I don't believe in labels for kids," Gamrath concluded. "They're self-defeating; absolutes are not healthy."

The profile of the class of 2018 shows that students move levels and classes all the time, placing the majority of students in a range of class levels, almost half taking both three and four levels and only three percent of the class taking all 4 level classes.

"The level recommendations that incoming freshmen are given are intended to guide their curricular choices for ninth grade. Families can make changes to the recommendations if they feel that their student will be more suited in a different level," explained Worth.

Senior Anna Fellman said she ended up taking some classes a level down from her recommendations from the placement test, "so I wouldn't be stressed out."

While the school puts careful thought into each student's recommendations, there is still the option to move levels based on

student preference.

Fellman said that her sister felt pressure based on her own placement test results.

"She felt this need to place into all level fours and got super stressed," she said.

Despite the stress around the four-hour long test, high school courses are not based only on these results.

"Coordinators and chairpersons from the core academic departments hand-place every incoming student," Worth said, emphasizing the individual focus in the placement process.

While "all placements are a little bit of guesswork," Gamrath said chairs and coordinators meet for two weeks to discuss placements.

Worth detailed a pilot program at two sender schools that invites families to have a 15 minute personal conference with a NT representative to pick freshman year courses.

"We think this will give families the most accurate information and the best academic counseling as they choose their courses for 9th grade," Worth explained. "If the pilot goes well, we hope to continue this program next year with all of our sender schools."

In addition, the school hosts events to help incoming students find out about various activities.

The countdown calendar for incoming high school families includes several transition events that help students and their families find out about opportunities at New Trier.

Academic Life details freshmen's curricular choices, All About Electives allows students to see the elective offerings at the school, Understanding the Placement Process introduces the level system for families new to NT, and After the Academics shows students all their extracurricular opportunities.

These events are held throughout the year before students enter high school.

New Trier remains accessible to incoming families during the registration process after course recommendations and test scores are sent to incoming freshmen in early February.

According to Worth, "there is a helpline to answer families' scheduling questions, and department coordinators and administrators spend a great deal of time speaking directly with families during the registration period and answering questions."

Worth also explained that students meet with their advisers and teachers throughout 9th grade to make sure they end up in the right classes throughout high school.

"Very often," Worth elaborated, "students have a better sense of themselves as learners as they progress through their freshman year, and they can work with their teachers and adviser to make appropriate choices for their later years."

## Concern grows over environmental impact of plastic utensils

### Debate over use of plastic versus metal utensils in cafeteria continues

by Grant Feldman

New Trier's cafeteria has made efforts toward environmental sustainability, but plastic utensils are still the only tableware offered to students.

With no reusable alternative, students have no choice but to contribute to the waste of single-use plastics.

Eight million metric tons of plastic are dumped in the oceans each year, six million of which are single-use plastics including forks, knives, and spoons. Americans throw away 100 million plastic utensils every day, unknowingly contributing to ocean pollution. In comparison, metal utensils last for decades, and are seen as an eco-friendly replacement.

"Aluminum utensils are better than plastic, because plastic can only be recycled a finite amount of times, whereas aluminum can be recycled an infinite amount of times," said senior Stella Cook, co-head of NT's Environmental Club.

The energy required to wash metal utensils, or silverware, is less harmful than the waste produced by transporting plastic utensils to the landfill and disposing of them, according to a study by the University



6 million tons of single-use plastics get thrown out every year and contribute to environmental pollution | NT News

of Chicago.

Metal utensils also pose benefits from a financial standpoint. A 2014 study from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency estimated that over three years, a school using metal rather than plastic would save \$23,000. A one-time investment in metal tableware would be substantially less than buying new plastic utensils for every school day.

The study also saw a 6,000-pound reduction in waste after switching to metal. Greenhouse gas emissions and water consumption decreased 77% over one year, and were estimated to decrease 88% over three years.

Some students prefer metal not just for environmental reasons but for personal preference. Senior Erin Murdoch said, "[Metal utensils] are good for the environment, and they

break less."

Junior Jack Greco agreed, saying that he prefers metal utensils because they are "easier to cut with."

While the majority of students agree that metal utensils are better for reducing waste, some feel that plastic is more convenient.

"Students have to return metal utensils [to the cafeteria], but can take plastic anywhere in the school," said junior Ryan Ball.

Senior Jonathan Taylor added, "I think metal is better for the environment, but plastic is less to clean."

A potential drawback of metal utensils is the need for cleaning. Dishwashers and staff would be required to ensure the daily washing of silverware. There have been no problems with the current cafeteria setup of all-plastic tableware, and

plastic utensils are more convenient, but only in the short term.

There is a long-term environmental cost that can't be ignored. With around 3,000 students at the Winnetka campus, many of whom use forks and spoons in the cafeteria daily, there lies an opportunity to cut down on the school's plastic consumption.

With increasing social awareness about the dangers of plastic waste, governments and corporations have started to take action.

France has been pushing to ban plastic water bottles in schools. In July, Seattle banned plastic straws and utensils in bars and restaurants, and Starbucks plans to remove plastic straws from all stores by 2020.

The European Union also drafted a ban on plastic products that will go into effect in the next few

years.

It seems the plastic we throw away is gone once it's picked up by garbage trucks, but garbage in the Chicago area is taken to transfer stations, where it is then dumped in one of four landfills within 100 miles of Chicago. In locales without waste collection services, trash is dumped into lakes and oceans.

The Great Pacific Garbage patch has grown to more than twice the size of Texas, and is composed of an estimated 80,000-100,000 tons of plastic. Such pollution kills marine life and is even beginning to harm humans as plastic concentration in seafood and drinking water rises.

The solution to plastic pollution seems simple: reduce the use of plastic products. It is important to recycle plastic when it is used, but most recycled plastic ends up being thrown away.

In the last few years, New Trier has added filtered water fountains to replace and refill bottles, and the environmental club issued reusable Nalgene to all students in 2017. There has been an effort to reduce plastic bottle waste — it would seem logical to reduce plastic utensil waste next.

"The administration has shown that they are interested in being more sustainable in the past, but I think it's important for students to let them know that [reducing plastic] is something they want as well," said Cook. "We don't always see the effects of our waste."