

A Detailed Description of the Steps We Took to Transform Our Electives System

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I. Establish our Rationale

The first thing we did was clarify and articulate our reason for change. Our district’s vision was to ensure every graduating student was prepared for success. Our middle schools’ implementation of that vision was to capitalize on the unique developmental stage of the adolescent child— in other words, it was the perfect time to consider their balance of academics, interest, and extracurriculars to become a well-rounded student. We knew we needed to meet course requirements, of course, but we also wanted to get creative in how we did so. We wanted students to explore a variety of pathways and topics, including visual arts, communications, performing arts, wellness, and technology. We wanted to update courses as a way to improve student engagement and increase enthusiasm about the middle school years. .

II. The How

We took an entire academic year to plan, communicate, and train teachers. Here are the steps we took, though not necessarily sequentially— many of these “steps” overlapped one another, and some of them were revisited multiple times as we learned, adjusted, and improved our plan.

Phase 1: Vision & Design

- **Brainstorm:** We gathered ideas by surveying students, parents, and staff, then aggregated them into themes.
- **Build:** We envisioned a whole-school framework of classes that would meet state standards (if a core course) or develop rigor and alignment (if not).
- **Consider outcomes:** For some electives, particularly for older students, we established culminating portfolios of professional-quality projects, emphasizing narrative storytelling, critical thinking, and advanced technical skills.

Phase 2: Alignment & Logistics

- **Align:** We checked to make sure any viable possibilities for courses fit into our district’s existing high school pathways.

- **Cross-check curriculum:** We made sure classes could adhere to content standards, rules, schedules, and guidelines.
- **Establish a budget:** We determined how much financial support would be necessary, and reconciled that with how much money was in the budget at both the central office level and within building-level budgets.

Phase 3: Staffing & Buy-In

- **Get buy-in:** We made sure our teacher association president was at the table for these conversations, and had frequent check-ins to make sure to address contractual concerns. We also made sure all departments and schools were kept up to date with each step of the process.
- **Identify staff:** It was— and remains— a dark time with school budgets, so we were committed to adding choice without hiring new staff. We made the decision to unblock language arts— a longstanding practice in our district— which freed up several teachers who were certified to teach humanities courses. Next, principals worked with their existing teachers to determine who was eager to take on a new course. This wasn't easy. Many of our staff had taught one class for two decades or more, so encouraging them to take on additional preps took a lot of conversations. We also had to cross-check their interest with their state-issued certifications.
- **Assign specialists:** Certain unique electives required specific expertise, so we identified specific skills or necessary certifications.
- **Identify resources:** For some classes, we built the curriculum from scratch. In a few cases, we adopted established curriculum frameworks.

Phase 4: Student Experience & Scheduling

- **Include counselors:** Our school counselors were involved from the beginning, so when they began the student scheduling process, they were prepared to answer most student questions. If they didn't have answers, they communicated with each other to come to consensus.
- **Target:** We were very focused on the developmental goals of each grade. Grade 6 electives focused on transition and offered an introduction to elective choices. Grade 7 was identified as a time for students to explore new areas of study. Grade 8 offered students the opportunity to deep dive by selecting full-year options alongside core courses.
- **Open classes:** We considered allowing sixth, seventh, and eighth graders to be co-sat in classes that looped, so a student could repeat a class if it was of special interest to them. In the end, this consideration proved untenable, so eligibility was still linked to a grade-

specific structure. We did, however, remain open to specific adjustments for specific circumstances.

- **Communicate Prerequisites/Exclusions:** If the course was meant to build on previous knowledge, we clearly articulated prerequisites. We were mindful of repetition rules, such as preventing students from taking a non-looped class in multiple grades unless there was a plan for differentiation within that class.
- **Establish capacities:** We considered how classroom capacities might limit the number of students who could take any given course.

Phase 5: Differentiation & Support

- **Plan for differentiation:** We wanted to ensure the electives were rooted in a student's individualized growth and learning. We discussed our academic support systems and offered additional options for students who qualified (based on a data review), providing more time and support in core areas.
- **EL Programming:** We also honed in on English Learner (EL) programming to offer specialized instruction, often replacing core ELA classes or serving as sheltered content in Math, Science, and Social Studies for students at the emerging level. We knew EL students may need to be assigned additional support classes in place of elective options, but we committed to making this support targeted and intense so it could be temporary— we wanted all EL students to have choice as soon as they were ready.

III. The What

Each step was part of months-long discussions with principals, teacher leaders, and school counselors. When it came time to actually schedule students, we had a plan for communication— each school hosted parent information nights, communicated through email, website, and recorded sessions, and encouraged students to seek advice from current teachers and academic counselors.

Here are the electives that we offered. Each was for a specific grade band, though I have omitted that detail so readers may imagine placement in any middle grade.

Creative and Communications Focus:

- Video and Communications (Focuses on public speaking, listening skills, podcasting, debate, video creation, and TEDTalks, with an emphasis on social media safety.)
- Drawing, Painting, and Collage (Applies intermediate elements of visual art; hands-on class exploring historic and contemporary art from diverse cultures.)

- Introduction to Theatre (Fundamentals of theatre through performance, production, and design, emphasizing storytelling, collaboration, and stagecraft.)
- Art & Design (Further develops and refines skills in drawing, sculpture, painting, printmaking, and ceramics, culminating in a wide variety of independent and group projects.)

Technology, Engineering, and Digital Literacy Focus

- Becoming a Digital Citizen (Essential skills for navigating the digital world safely and responsibly, including foundational AI literacy.)
- Digital Literacy (Literacy skills through various formats like blogging, web design, effective research, poetry, and the safe and productive use of AI.)
- App Creators (Uses Project Lead the Way (TRADEMARK) curriculum to introduce computer science and computational thinking through the collaborative design and development of mobile apps.)
- STEAM (A project-oriented, interdisciplinary course using science, math, engineering, and technology to investigate real-world problems. Uses PLTW's Automation and Robotics unit.)

Problem-Solving, Leadership, and Global Focus

- Creative Mindsets (Immerses students in project-based learning focused on creative problem solving. Taught by a gifted intervention specialist and open to all grades.)
- Medical Detectives (Students play the role of detectives using hands-on projects and labs to collect and analyze medical data to diagnose disease.)
- World Traveler (Exposure to culture and beginning language in Spanish, German, French, Japanese, and Chinese, supporting future World Language course decisions.)
- Leadership & Service (Builds future leaders through training and passion driven projects, fostering empathy and recognizing community need.)

Lessons We're Learning

We are in our second year of implementation, and we are currently reviewing the success of the program and how we can make it better. As I write this, I'm reflecting on a meeting I had just yesterday with the leaders who are making adjustments for next year. Here are a few things we would caution for anyone leading this process:

- **Don't get too big.** As we got started a few years ago, we consulted with a district who had done something similar, but they had made a big misstep: In an effort to get teachers on board, they asked that every teacher propose an elective. As a result, there

were thirty different options. What happened? With so many choices, students were overwhelmed. They just signed up for teachers they liked, so some classes had no enrollees while some had fifty. Classes were cancelled. The ones that *did* hold often turned into massive study centers. Worse, they were sometimes taught by teachers who'd been assigned to manage the overflow, not the ones who proposed the class—a certain way to make teachers resentful and uninterested. From this district, we learned to stay relatively small— giving students choice didn't mean we had to give them *too much* choice.

- **Do an ongoing audit:** We knew there would be bumps in the road, and there certainly were. We took note of all the problems and tried to make adjustments— more training, different resources, increased communication, and so on. We plan to continue to audit the offerings annually and make changes on an ongoing basis..
- **Be open to mistakes, change, and mea culpa moments.** Humility is your best friend. Avoid getting upset at missteps; learn from errors Just keep coming to the table with ideas and a commitment to problem solving. And don't forget to laugh.
- **Celebrate:** There will be enough problems to keep you up at night. Make sure you give yourself a few pats on the back when you get the small wins. You deserve it.

[Read my MiddleWeb article](#) for more background and perspective.