

King Elementary > West Middle School > Auburn Academy



Gifted News

A Newsletter from Parents for Gifted Education (PGE) • District 205

Why Gifted at Auburn and West?

MORE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Some families are under the misconception that gifted education does not provide more learning opportunities, rather, that teachers just make students do more homework. Yet one of the foremost reasons students move into the program at middle school is because the depth of the gifted class work results in better preparation for high school course work.

One way this is accomplished is through a **Differentiated Curriculum**. The curriculum is given extended breadth and depth through alternative and enriched course content, thinking processes, and varied products which address different learning styles. To achieve this depth, our *students are given substantial, but manageable, levels of homework.*

Students in the gifted program also benefit from expanded course offerings. For example, West is the only middle school offering algebra in seventh grade, geometry in eighth grade, a two year foreign language program, and hands on science labs. Auburn is the *only* district high school *currently running* (not just offered, but running) two years of calculus, five years of a foreign language, microbiology, organic chemistry and an AP physics class. Consider the depth of Advanced Placement classes if you need further proof that the students actually have more learning opportunities.

DEPTH OF ADVANCED PLACEMENT CLASSES

Here's an example of how the AP selection influenced one family's choosing Auburn; "When we looked ahead to the senior year, we realized we would run out of classes at Guilford." Jon Bennett,

Auburn 16

Boylan 6

Guilford 9

Lutheran 1

a transfer student from Boylan into the Academy, made the change initially because "Auburn had more class options, including a deeper breadth of AP and upper-level courses. It was difficult to get into AP classes at Boylan due to the highly limited number of sections. Physics is only offered to seniors, and they don't even offer microbiology or organic chemistry." After the transfer, Jon said he discovered Auburn had "a much more challenging curriculum than he experienced at Boylan."

SCHOLASTIC STATISTICS

RPS 205 students taking an AP class are now required to partici-

pate in the national testing program. Test scores range between 1 and 5. Most colleges offer credit for the class if a student receives a 3, 4, or 5 on an exam.

In 2005, 82.06% of the 223 AP exams taken by Academy students were passed with a score of 3 or higher. This supports the fact that Auburn students aren't just taking the classes, they are learning the material. While some schools set per-student limits on the total number of credits they will apply, it is common for Academy students to begin their college careers with over 30 hours of AP credit, enough to be classified as a second year student.

The fact that Academy students are actually learning more is supported by their **nationally recognized ACT Performance**. Recent average ACT scores for Academy students out of a possible 36 are:

2002	28.5	2003	27.4	2004	28.2	2004	28.98
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Each year, these scores place Auburn Academy in the **top one percent of high schools in the nation!** In 2002, the last year ACT Corporation ordered schools by ranking, Auburn Academy was listed **as one of the top five schools in the nation!** In 2003, Auburn was chosen as one of only 10 schools in the nation selected to participate in a study on how schools with diverse populations prepare students for success in college coursework based on the strong ACT scores earned in English, math and science.

The Academy has three times the Number of National Merit Semi-Finalists of ANY Rockford School!

National Merit Semi-finalists by school

Year	Auburn	Boylan	Guilford	Keith	Lutheran	Others
2005-06	5	2	0	1	0	2
2004-05	3	2	0	0	0	2
2003-04	7	3	0	1	0	0
2002-03	8	0	1	1	0	1
2000-01	9	2	0	1	2	1
1999-00	5	4	1	0	0	0
1998-99	4	1	0	2	0	0
1997-98	3	3	3	0	1	0
1995-96	10	1	1	0	0	1
1994-95	11	3	1	1	0	2
Total	65	21	7	7	3	9

Records not available for 2001-02 or 1996-97 school years

Why Gifted? (cont'd)

(Continued from page 1)

The state of Illinois requires all juniors to take the PSAT exam. The top scoring ½% of students in the nation are named semi-finalists. This distinction is even more impressive considering the cut off score is decided on a per state basis, and Illinois students historically score higher than students from other states (at last ranking, three of the top five scoring high schools in the nation were in Illinois). Semi-finalists go on to compete for a position as a finalist.

Over the last decade, Auburn has produced over 65 National Merit Semi-Finalists (see chart on previous page), the school with the next highest number had 21. And the names of many of the non-Auburn students achieving this distinction are recognizable as former students of King and West gifted classes. The last two years, **all of the Auburn semi-finalists went on to be named finalists**, guaranteeing each a merit-based college scholarship. Speaking of scholarships...

MONEY IN YOUR POCKET

Each year our graduating seniors receive millions of dollars in scholarship offers. One figure private schools like Boylan and Keith will use to sell you on their school are the scholarship "offers" received by their graduating seniors any given year.. If you only consider the *seven* offers for FULL TUTION with room and board (averaging \$100,000 each) made to our seven 2004 national merit finalists, **\$5 million dollars** of scholarship money was available to those students. If you add in the offers for the other 60 graduating Academy students, many of whom *received* up to half of their tuition in scholarships, Academy students clearly outrank the other schools 3:1 in scholarship money offered *and* received. (By the way, two of the 2004 National Merit Finalists did take advantage of those full ride scholarships, with the other 5 all receiving varied levels of scholarship money).

As mentioned previously, AP classes are another way parents save tens of thousands of dollars in tuition when students begin their college career with anywhere up to three semesters of AP college credit. Not only does Auburn have the highest number of AP classes available of any high school in the area, **the school district pays for 5 AP exams**, at \$82 per test, for each Academy student because they are required classes in the curriculum. In addition to the monetary savings from beginning school with a year of credits under their belt, students experience the benefit of registering earlier for their classes, beating out other incoming freshman for hard to get spaces in classes that fill early. Students who miss entry into critical required classes their freshman year are often those faced with the five year plan as a result of waiting another year to take classes only available during a single semester.

AUBURN OFFERS MORE ZERO HOUR CLASSES AND ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

Last year, the Board of Education voted to reinstate the zero hour for high schools. Once again, Auburn received allocations for 2 additional classes (5 total), compared to zero hour classes at the

other high schools. The additional classes make it possible to offer coursework for all grade levels.

In addition, only Auburn offers the following career classes and all are available to Academy students:

CAPA– The Creative and Performing Arts Program is also a conjunctive piece of the program serving RPS 205's Gifted and Talented Students. Academy students make up over one third of the students enrolled in the CAPA. The program develops talents in art, dance, keyboard, instrumental and vocal music, visual and graphic arts, and theater. As with the Academy, the Creative and Performing Arts Program offers special class sections with peers who are more dedicated and teachers who give students more responsibility and respect. Students in these classes have provided support for theaters in other districts as well as experiences with professional agencies from Rockford to Chicago. Graduates have gone on to work with Destiny's Child, Cher and Michael Jackson.

Information Technology– Cisco certification, Microsoft A+ certification in computer diagnostics and repair, INET certification for Internet systems and web design, and Introduction to Technology are offered.

ROTC- Students in this program develop leadership skills, receive valuable non-military training and qualify for financial support for college.

Media Communications– Broadcast Media and Media Technology offer student hands-on experience in television reporting and production. Auburn is the only school in the district to have a complete recording studio and sound lab and have been responsible for the filming and broadcast of the RPS 205 Board of Education Meetings for the last two years.

Aviation– Aerospace and the Fundamentals of Flight prepare students to take the FAA written exam for private pilots and to enter the Airframe and Power-Plant certification program at Rock Valley College.

THE OVER EMPHASIS ON BEING VALEDICTORIAN

When a university chooses between a student with a GPA of 4.0 and a 25 ACT, and another with a 3.75 GPA and a 33 ACT, is there really any question who they consider to be the stronger candidate? If a school has 13 valedictorians, universities question the rigor of the classes and the level of grade inflation. As the admissions officer from MIT told one student, to us an A means nothing unless we know in which class it was received.

While many students succumb to the lure of short term recognition over life-long learning, no one should overestimate the power of being a valedictorian in exchange for pursuing a demanding curriculum. US News and World Report suggests, "... from the beginning of your high school career, you should strive to take challenging classes, even at the risk of lower grades." Admission officers from around the country continually recognize Auburn Academy as one of the outstanding college preparatory programs IN THE NATION due to the rigor of its curriculum.

Still, students and parents alike have asked, 'what is the benefit

(Continued on page 3)

Why Gifted? (cont'd)

(Continued from page 2)

of taking harder classes?' The obvious response is STUDENTS LEARN MORE! For those who need a more tangible reward, beginning this year the district has resumed weighting grades for AP classes on a 5 point scale, where A=5, B=4, etc. Academy students' GPAs will no longer fall behind those of students in traditional and honors classes when the Academy student get's a B in a more difficult (AP) class since that B is now worth the equivalent of an A in the traditional class.

Academy students can actually earn higher GPAs than at other schools because of the volume of AP classes available. Of course higher GPAs will in turn result in higher class ranks. Academy students now have the opportunity to rank ahead of students taking less demanding coursework. And if you don't believe it works, ask seniors around the district who recently experienced changes in their class ranks when the district retroactively weighted their AP grades and used the new GPAs to recalculate class rank. No longer was a 4.0 a 4.0. Students who had taken more AP classes moved ahead of their contemporaries who had chosen to take the easier academic route.

ACADEMY PARENTS SHARE THEIR OPINIONS

One family said they chose West because the rest of the middle schools in the district were "...black holes, where you put your student in and three years later they emerge physically more mature, but lacking the foundation needed to be successful in high school." Martha Hayes, chief instructional officer for the district, has repeatedly identified the district's non-gifted middle school classes as falling short in preparing students for their high school careers. Those complaints are seldom heard from parents, teachers or administrators with regard to the graduates of West's gifted program.

West parents are enthusiastic to have their children able to take both a foreign language and band (almost 200 students are currently enrolled in band!). In addition to concert band and orchestra, there is a voluntary Jazz band meeting twice weekly for an hour before school begins. West also has an extensive selection of sports and extracurricular activities. They were the first to bring back middle school football and won this year's Stateline Conference Title. They have won the district IESA title in swimming, and have repeatedly qualified for state in track. West's scholastic bowl team, comprised of students from all three grade levels of the gifted program, thrilled everyone by winning the state tournament for the second year in a row last spring. These are all possible due to the dedication of the staff in developing the "whole student." And as a site based school, West parents work with these same teachers and administrators participating in interviews for new staff and in the operation of the school.

As for the Academy, when asked why they chose this program for their second child while another was attending Boylan, parent Gina Boettcher cited "...the exceptional teaching staff." Other parents enthusiastically refer to the "collegial atmosphere" between students and faculty as a benefit to their child's maturation as well as learning. Academy teachers engage and interact with

students in a more adult relationship than typical of the traditional high school student teacher relationship. During the 2004 North Central Accreditation, the review team was told by students that they felt "teachers cared about them." According to Academy faculty, **"Elevated expectations by teachers of their students parallel a spirit of experimentation and risk demanded by gifted students of their teachers."** The consortium working with the district on site-based management, told our parents that small learning communities, such as the Academy, result in stronger relationships between staff and students, as well as significantly higher test scores. "Academy students then emerge with skills of searching out concepts, not just facts; of analyzing, not just memorizing; of creating new ideas, not just understanding old ones; of evaluating the great cognitive achievements of cultures by **questioning the answers, not merely by answering the questions.**

FINALLY, THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

One child who chose to move from Eisenhower to West between sixth and seventh grades, based his decision, in large part, on the opportunity for gifted students to perform their own experiments in science labs instead of watching the teacher demonstrate the experiments to the students. Another student who had not attended the elementary gifted program said she was tired of being called "dictionary" by classmates. Both students had siblings attending other middle schools, but as one parent stated, "I am trying to meet the individual needs of each of my children. If one had asthma, I wouldn't give both of them the medication to treat it."

The parent of the Boylan student who chose the Academy for their second child related, **"The single most important factor in choosing Auburn was peer support. My daughter is in class with kids who are like her - prepared, willing and anxious to learn."** This attitude lends itself to development of the collegial student-staff relationships discussed earlier. **When students are in school with the goal of learning, there are fewer discipline problems. Peer pressure and the challenging curriculum help keep classes focused and students engaged.**

Another family with students at both Auburn and Guilford stated their family enjoyed "the variety of kids at Auburn." The mom elucidated by saying, **"kids at Auburn are more accepting and appreciative of the other students for who they are."** Students appreciate the variety of opportunities available. As one student quipped, "At Auburn, I'm not excluded from participating in any activity from lack of experience. **I can try anything I want without feeling pressure from the other kids about not being good enough or cool enough.**" Jon Bennett said once at Auburn, he found **"...a student body that seemed focused on classes and constructive use of time" and "nicer teachers who were more respectful of the students."**

When considering educational opportunities in Rockford, families have to look at the Academy as a long term, life-enriching experience. Although rigorous coursework requires a higher investment of effort, the payoff is that students learn more, score better on standardized tests and are better prepared for college and life.