

How is New School High Different?

New School High was created to reflect the best research about educating teen-agers and creating a safe, healthy environment in which to learn. Here are aspects of our program that demonstrate our commitment to placing learning at the center of everything we do.

A LATER START TIME

At New School High, the school day begins later in the morning because we know that sleep cycles of adolescents differ from those of children and many adults. Since most high school students are not ready to learn at extremely early hours, classes at New School High begin at 8:30 am and end at 3:30 pm.

DAILY SCHEDULE DESIGNED AROUND LEARNING

Our daily schedule is designed to support student learning. This is different from traditional schools, which base time usage on numerous other factors such as bus schedules, after-school athletic events, and classroom uniformity. In a traditional system, all classes have the same number of students and same duration, regardless of student needs or type of class. At New School High, we believe that class duration and size should be at the service of learning. Direct instruction and discussion sections will be no larger than 25 students. Sometimes classes may combine for a large-group presentation. At other times, teachers may guide groups of 2-8 students for project-based learning. There is also substantial scheduled time for independent study, always with adult supervision.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

There is much concern in our nation about stress, lack of exercise, and unhealthy sleeping and eating habits among adolescents. While the Michigan Merit Curriculum requires one semester of Health and one semester of Physical Education, we do not believe this is adequate for optimal well-being. Wellness enhances learning, too. At New School High, health and wellness instruction and practice is a significant part of the educational program throughout all four years. This may take different forms, depending on the student's needs and interests.

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

At New School High, we do not believe objective, multiple-choice style tests are a reliable way to assess student learning. How can students demonstrate their skills best? Project-based learning is a way for students to meet the content standards while engaging in activities that are hands-on and relevant to their interests and goals. Projects are evaluated based on a clear rubric that reflects the standards. Projects may be done by an individual or a group; they can focus on one content area or be interdisciplinary. The goal of the project is always to produce concrete evidence of learning that can be shared. As such, project-based learning requires higher levels of critical thinking than a more traditional approach that emphasizes memorization. It is a way for students to demonstrate deep understanding through applying, evaluating, and creating knowledge and skills.

ADVISORY

Advisory for 9th Graders

Strong research shows that success in 9th grade is crucial to a student's success in high school. As with any transition, entering high school comes with new routines, expectations, people, and challenges. At New School High, first year students are not simply thrown into the deep end of the pool and expected to swim. We know there are academic and personal tools students will need to succeed. Our advisory groups, which are an essential part of our educational program, will address the following questions:

- What kind of a learner am I? What ways do I learn best? How can I advocate for myself throughout my life if I need more support or additional challenge to fulfill my potential?
- What academic behaviors are necessary for me to be successful in high school? How can I develop an academic mindset?
- How can I use technology effectively, appropriately, and safely for learning and communicating?
- What are the most productive and respectful ways to communicate with others? What personal and organizational skills do I need to work successfully both independently and as a member of a team or group?
- What are my interests, strengths, and challenges? How can I help shape my own learning to pursue the things I love, improve my weaknesses, and explore new topics and opportunities?
- How can I contribute to the spirit and success of New School High? What behaviors are expected of each member of our learning community? How will we handle it if members do not adhere to our behavior expectations?

Advisory for 10th, 11th, 12th Grades

As students grow and mature, their needs change. Advisory in the later grades will continue to address some of the same topics explored in Grade 9, and add new ones, such as:

- What resources are available in my community? How might I learn from and be of service to the people in my community?
- How can I learn more about career possibilities? What training will I need for occupations I may want to pursue? How can I find the best post-secondary program in my field of interest?
- What colleges are good matches for me? How do I prepare the best possible college application? What do I need to know about financing and scholarships?
- How can I prepare for the transition to life after high school? What are my concerns about increasing responsibilities and independence? What resources will be available to help me be successful as a young adult?

ORIENTATION

As experienced teachers, we know that having accurate, useful information about our students' knowledge and skills, interests, and goals is essential to helping them be successful. If we can have this information early on, we can avoid the risk of discovering weeks or even months later that a student has been misplaced. We want to have the advantage of designing the student's program to fit their needs right away. At New School High, we will invest in learning about your student before we do anything else. Our intensive orientation period before regular classes begin will accomplish three goals:

1. Evaluate each student's academic and personal needs and develop an Individual Learning Plan based on the academic content standards as well as the personal standards.
2. Instruct all students on the safe and effective use of technology.
3. Begin the Advisory curriculum with the immediate goal of building relationships as well as a school spirit and identity.

INDIVIDUAL LEARNING PLANS

At New School High, every student will have an individual learning plan that guides the student's academic and personal development. Individual learning plans will be created by teachers, students, and families together. The plans will be continuously revised throughout the school year to reflect the student's evolving needs. The learning plan will include:

- Academic goals related to achieving proficiency in the academic standards -- these goals strictly reflect the student's demonstrated knowledge and skills, and do not take personal behaviors into account.
- Personal goals related to becoming a responsible and contributing citizen -- these goals reflect personal qualities that contribute to success in school, work, and life, such as persistence, cooperation, preparation, and participation.

Progress will be documented in the student's permanent portfolio, which will include traditional assessments (quizzes and exams), performance assessments (demonstrations of knowledge or skill), informal evaluations (teacher observations) and projects (extended, often interdisciplinary projects that address numerous content standards).

STANDARDS BASED REPORT CARDS

In a traditional high school, report cards are typically issued four times each year with a single letter grade indicating the student's overall achievement in each course. Sometimes there is also a teacher comment. Such report cards do not provide specific information about the student's knowledge or skills. For example, a simple grade of B in an English class does not indicate whether or not the student can write an effective essay, or if the student shines in oral presentations, or if the student is reading below or above grade level.

At New School High, report cards are standards-based. This means the student's progress in achieving proficiency for each individual course standard will be reflected on the report card. As a result, students and their parents will know exactly what knowledge and skills the student has acquired. For English Language Arts and Math, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will be used, as required by the State. For other content areas, the Michigan Merit Curriculum standards (MMC) will also be used.

GRADES

Students will be graded in two domains: academic and personal. Only academic grades will be reflected in the student's grade point average. Both will be accompanied by extensive documentation in the form of assessments and student work contained in each student's permanent portfolio, an important part of every student's records.

Academic Grading

Academic grading is standards-based, which means students are not evaluated by comparing them to other students. Instead, students are evaluated based on how close they come to meeting each content area standard. If a student has demonstrated he or she has fully met a content standard, the grade of A is earned for that specific standard.

Both CCSS and MMC include numerous standards. Some are more important than others and are therefore identified as Priority Standards; these are the main focus of teaching and learning at New School High. Students must continue to work on Priority Standards until they are met. Some students will meet standards in a few days, other students may require several years. At New School High, each student works at his or her own pace. Students are also encouraged to improve their rating at any time.

Grades have three purposes: to provide useful feedback to the student, to document progress, and to help teachers plan next steps for that student. Since the standards-based grading policy at New School High was designed to support these goals, academic grades are based solely on performance on specific standards. Grades will not be used as punishment. Zeroes will not be given for missing work and averaged into a final grade. Quantity of work will not substitute for quality of work. Personal qualities or behaviors will not be factors in academic grades.

Personal Grading

At New School High, positive personal skills are valued as essential to success. Therefore, skills such as cooperation, respect, preparation, leadership, creativity, and responsibility are explicitly addressed in Advisory and pro-actively supported in all other school interactions. As with academic grades, personal grades serve to provide useful feedback to students, document progress, and guide the next steps of the instructional staff. Personal grades are standards-based but not a part of a student's grade point average (GPA). Personal grades may provide valuable documentation for the student who is applying for an internship or a part-time or summer job. While preparing his or her college application, personal grades will be powerful evidence of desirable skills such as collaboration, creativity, and leadership.

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

In traditional schools, the range of skills required for success is very narrow. Student strengths and abilities are not always acknowledged. At New School High, the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) will be incorporated into lesson design and student assessment to the greatest possible extent to ensure that every student can achieve at high levels. This means teachers may use multiple means of communicating content, students may be allowed to express what they know and can do in various ways, and student interests and goals will always be an important priority in the design for learning.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

At New School High, we know that learning is not limited to a school building or a school day. We place great value on the resources of our community to support the learning of our students. Collaboration with the Plymouth Historical Society, the Michigan Philharmonic, and the Plymouth Community Art Council -- with partnerships with other non-profit organizations, institutions of higher learning, and businesses, to follow -- are essential to our program and may take the form of speakers, guest experts, on-site project-based learning/research, service learning, student internships, project mentors, career exploration, or employment. Community resources will also play a significant role in the sustained, high-quality individual project required of each student before graduation.

PARENT ADVISORY AND PARENT ACADEMY

Learning is a partnership involving the school, the student, and the family. Our families are essential to our success. To build a network of support, we encourage all our parents to participate in the Parent Advisory for regular dialogue with the staff, as well as Parent Academy to share knowledge about any topic that promotes student growth and well-being.

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For more information, contact Cynthia Burnstein, school leader, at cburnstein@newschoolhigh.org or leave a message at our website newschoolhigh.org.