

Pioneering Academic Excellence – Frequently Asked Questions

Beginning in the 2017–18 school year, Western Reserve Academy will transition to an independent, student-centered curriculum that connects to our mission, emboldens our faculty and helps our students soar. The new curriculum will bring greater flexibility and creativity to the classroom, encourage optimization of The Center for Technology, Innovation & Creativity, and demonstrate our enduring mindset as educational pioneers, as we become the first independent school in our region to move beyond Advanced Placement (AP) courses, joining a growing cohort of the country’s best boarding and day schools.

We realize this may be regarded as a bold change. Here are answers to common questions we have received:

Why are you changing from AP courses to an independent curriculum?

We have the ability and the imperative from our mission to offer a transformational educational experience that is unique. Having an externally produced curriculum does not maximize the potential for creativity and exemplary quality that we can provide. Our faculty are excited to engage students by working toward depth of understanding, rather than focusing on covering content rooted in the philosophy that teachers must “teach to the test.” The faculty looks forward to moments of spontaneous interaction with students, course material and the world in which we live.

In our most advanced biology class, for example, Dr. Robert Aguilar includes topics such as biochemistry, microbiology, disease, medicine, bioethics and pathology, all topics excluded from AP Biology. The opportunities to problem solve, engage in project-based learning, use The Center for Technology, Innovation & Creativity, and research and collaborate will abound in the new curriculum.

What does this mean for my student’s overall experience at Reserve?

Our move to an independent curriculum is the single largest transformation of our academic program in the school’s history — the new curriculum is richer, more dynamic and more forward-thinking. Our commitment to building foundational knowledge remains steadfast, but we are evolving our academic vision to cultivate 21st century skills in our students. These are transferable skills like collaboration, creativity, resilience, critical thinking, problem solving, initiative and entrepreneurship. Our Signature Programs and learning spaces — including Compass, Saturday Academy, Beyond Reserve, and The Center for Technology, Innovation & Creativity — make the Reserve learning experience truly distinctive. Preparing students for success in college and beyond, and cultivating a lifelong love of learning.

How will colleges, parents and students know which courses are the most advanced, and will this change affect grading scales?

There will be a clear designation on top courses, making it easy for college admission officers, students and parents to identify the most challenging courses. As with the AP courses previously, our most advanced courses will receive a 1.1 GPA multiplier. For example, if a student gets a score of “6” in a course, he or she will receive a 6.6.

Will WRA students still be able to take AP exams if interested?

Yes, students can still sit for AP exams on our campus.

How will this influence college admission?

Our advanced and innovative curriculum differentiates our transcripts from thousands of others, a key consideration in the world of increasingly selective college admission. As such, we believe this change will enhance the college admission process. Our College Counseling Office promotes our curricular advantages to college admission offices. Information on our multi-faceted and rigorous curriculum is included as part of the college application process and throughout the year as we communicate with schools on behalf of our students.

Deans of admission at colleges and universities across the country, including Harvard, Stanford, Cornell, Bowdoin, Clark University, Middlebury College, Dartmouth College, the University of Pennsylvania and New York University all say that whether or not students have taken AP courses and AP exams is irrelevant; what matters is that applicants to their schools have pursued a challenging course of study at their respective high schools.

What about college credit?

AP scores have never guaranteed college credit. This is a decision that each college makes and increasingly, credit is only given for scoring a 4 or a 5 on an AP exam. We are building a curriculum that prepares students for ongoing learning success, and for life — not for a single test. Interestingly, MIT’s dean of admission reports the school’s biology department found that “even some students who scored 5’s on the AP did not have the problem-solving skills needed for higher-level college courses.” We can now build courses that address these concerns and best prepare students to think deeply and critically, serving them well in college and life.

What other schools have moved beyond the AP designation?

Many of the country’s best college-prep schools have moved beyond AP curricula, and we have joined an elite consortium of schools known as the Independent Curriculum Group.

When will we see the 2017–18 course list?

Our 2017–18 Curriculum Guide will be available in April.

Will SAT and ACT prep be provided?

All WRA students have access to online test preparation. Additionally, the school will provide opportunities to prepare for standardized tests with expert guidance. The junior class in particular will have required seminar sessions that will prepare them for these tests.

What will the new daily schedule look like?

The new curriculum allows students to follow their interests and passions on the road to learning and distinction, but just as important, on the path to wellness and fulfillment. The new schedule, consisting of four classes that meet per day for 75 minutes, decelerates the pace to provide intentional time for collaboration and meeting, while maintaining the rigor for which WRA is known. The longer class periods allow for greater student engagement, time for students to work in The Center for Technology, Innovation & Creativity, the ability to meet with teachers and other students, and opportunities to study and do homework during the day, with fewer courses to prepare for each night.

Overall, the schedule aligns with the goals of our independent curriculum, where the emphasis is on depth, discovery and collaboration, not memorization and “coverage” in preparation for a standardized test. We are very excited about courses that will provide a strong academic foundation and empower students to achieve a level of critical thinking, passion for learning and 21st century skills for the world ahead.