

WEDNESDAY JOURNAL
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Getting real about math

New curriculum changes designed to offer students multiple paths in math

By **MICHAEL ROMAIN**
 Contributing Reporter

Jeremy Donaldson, a 2010 graduate of Oak Park and River Forest High School, can still recall leaving high school only to be told by college officials that he'd have to pay to take a remedial course in math that would not count toward college credit. Donaldson spent a year at Triton College, where he didn't take a math course, before enrolling at Bethune Cookman College in Florida, where he was told he'd have to play catchup.

"That prolonged the time it took to get my degree and it cost me money, too," Donaldson said recently.

Due to changes coming to OPRF next school year, however, fewer students who leave the high school will go through the headaches Donaldson experienced.

Julie Frey, OPRF's mathematics division head, said that starting next academic year, juniors who don't demonstrate college-readiness on their SAT tests will have an opportunity while still in high school to build up proficiency.

That means we could see the end of students going off to community college and having to pay money for remedial courses that don't garner them any college credits.

"Right now, students are being asked to pay for a math class that they get no college credit for, so the state law is designed to allow them to take that remedial math here before they walk into college," said Frey.

The state law Frey references is the Postsecondary and Workforce Read-



ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

"That prolonged the time it took to get my degree and it cost me money, too."

— **Jeremy Donaldson**
 2010 OPRF grad

MATH PROBLEMS: OPRF is adding new math courses to meet the real world needs of more students.

ness Act, which was passed by state legislators in 2016. The legislation is designed to address a pressing reality. Roughly half of Illinois high school graduates require remedial education in community college. The ratio is the same among graduates of OPRF entering community college.

The three new math classes at OPRF include transition to STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), transition to quantitative literacy and

transition to technical math. The quantitative literacy course will be for students taking statistics while the technical math pathway will be for students who plan on entering technical fields like welding and mechanics, Frey said, adding that the two courses will be implemented in the 2019-20 school year. The transition to STEM course, she said, will be implemented in the 2020-21 school year.

Frey said that the courses will be open to seniors who have taken the equivalent of three years of math. She said that district officials are still figuring

out how students will be selected for the new courses, but that SAT scores will definitely factor into the selection process.

Frey added that the state is also expecting school districts to create math curricula that are applicable to the real world.

"For instance, in quantitative literacy and statistics, students will go on the web, find real data and use that real data to come up with their analysis, as opposed to what happens now, which is that students tend to learn in a vacu-

um," she said.

"I could have definitely benefited from that change," Donaldson said of the coming curriculum modifications, adding that he hopes the new courses lead to a more engaging math education for students.

"Obviously, I was in math courses that I didn't need to be in at OPRF, even though I made it through them and passed," he said. "It's good that students after me at least won't have to pay extra for what they didn't get in high school."

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More intense than ever: The college application process

By **LACEY SIKORA**
Contributing Reporter

In spite of innovations like Naviance and the Common Application, meant to make the college application process more stream-lined and accessible, the entire process of applying to college has a challenging learning curve for parents raised in different times. Essay prompts, financial aid forms and a never-ending stream of information on-line have only added to the stress.

For OPRF parent Lori Malinski, the change in generations is remarkable. "I went to college in the '70s, and it was a hugely different process. We didn't have counselors to help us and a lot of the time, our parents hadn't gone to college."

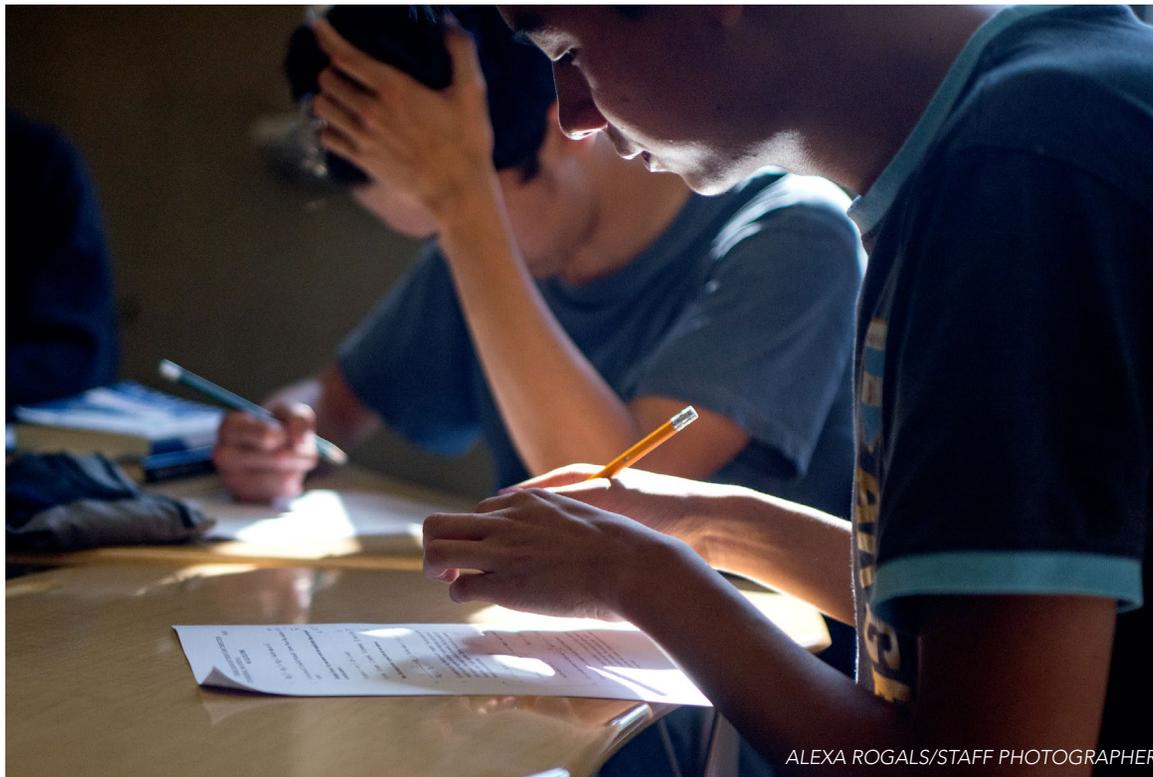
She applied to only one college and was never really happy with her choice. Her only son didn't want to make the same mistake, but as he neared his senior year, Malinski was unprepared for how much the process had changed.

During his junior year, she attended a financial aid presentation at Percy Julian Middle School but says she left early because the information was so intimidating. "We're lucky at the high school that there are a lot of resources, but it's too much. It's overwhelming."

One of the best resources for her family has been the OPRF Parents' page on Facebook. Hearing from other parents going through the process was extremely helpful. On the other hand, she says social media can be negative. "Over the summer, everyone was going on college trips. Not everyone has those means. It can be better to stay off Facebook for a while. It can add to the pressure."

Jeana Reisig says the process was eye-opening with her first son. "The first one, we were like deer in headlights. The high school does a really great job, but you don't know what you don't know."

She describes her first son as a gifted student with National Merit recognition. He received plenty of unsolicited literature from colleges, including one that offered an easy application, no fee required. He returned it but expected he would end up at another school,



ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

HIGH STRESS: Both students and parents feel anxiety over college applications.

possibly in the Ivy League. When that didn't pan out, that easy-application school ended up being the best fit for his engineering studies.

For Reisig, who was the first generation in her family to attend college, the emphasis today on test scores

ity. "We really thought our kid was so smart that he'd get a free ride. He did get some offers like that, but those schools weren't the right fit."

Reisig's husband lost his job in between filing the FAFSA forms and her son's enrollment in college, which added a level of stress. Her son ended up with a combination of scholarships and loans at a school that she describes as a great fit. "Because of his A.P. credits, he may be able to graduate with his masters in four years."

Kyra Tyler, senior director of Bright Horizons Education & College Advising, College Coach, says more families are hiring private counselors to help with a process that can seem overwhelming. "We work with super star students to kids who are struggling to get to college to everything in between."

The Forest Park resident says a professional counselor can make a difference in many situations. In families without a history of college attendance, she says, "College can be a step in changing your life and getting

a student on a better path."

On the other side of the equation are people familiar with the amount of work involved in getting a child to complete the applications and essays on their own, and they turn to professionals for guidance or because they don't want to argue with their kids for the months-long process.

Tyler emphasizes that each child is an individual. Some need help choosing where to apply or to prepare a portfolio or audition for an arts-based program. "We have a wide breadth of school knowledge and can think about schools where you will be successful."

A private counselor can ease the stress, but Tyler notes that families without the financial resources to hire someone can navigate the process with free resources.

A first step for all students? "Really connect with your school guidance counselor. Let them know your intentions -- that you are on the col-

lege path. If there is an opportunity for parents to join this conversation, they should."

She notes that there are almost 4,000 colleges in the country, which can be hard to winnow down. "The state of Illinois requires every student to take the SAT. After you take that, schools will start sending you information. Have an open heart; take a few minutes to go through this information. This is low-hanging fruit."

She recommends attending college representative visits, which most high schools host in the fall and spring, and says that organizations like the National Association of College Professionals (www.nacanet.org) also offer free fairs.

The internet is also a free, key resource. Big Future (<https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/>) an arm of the College Board includes helpful tools, and almost all schools have virtual tours and a wealth of information on their websites. Kahn Academy offers free test prep for the ACT and SAT.

Mary Matas, mother to a senior and sophomore at OPRF, notes that at the end of the day, even with all of the resources at hand, the process will be stress-inducing for everyone.

"The whole process is a little crazy. There's so much pressure to have great

test scores, do activities, work a part-time job. There's so much pressure that we didn't have 30 years ago. The high school does a great job of helping you, but a lot of it you just have to do yourself."

Reisig agrees, but says it gets easier the second time around. Her younger son, now a senior at

OPRF, absorbed some of the stress his brother's application process created. He applied for early decision to his favorite school and early action to another school, which has already offered him acceptance.

Reisig says that going through the process the first time was a learning experience for the whole family. "We realized most kids are happy where they end up. The kids, they find their place and they're more chill about it than we are."



Kyra Tyler

"The first one, we were like deer in headlights. The high school does a really great job, but you don't know what you don't know."

— **Jeana Reisig**
OPRF parent

was surprising, as was the financial aid process. She calls both, "a really big deal."

OPRF resources and a FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) meeting at the Oak Park library helped, but she says she and her husband weren't quite prepared for real-

How white and black students use summer school differently

New report is a spark for change at OPRF

By **LACEY SIKORA**
Contributing Reporter

In October, Oak Park and River Forest High School released its summer school evaluation, which reflected declining summer school enrollment as well as marked differences in how students take advantage of summer offerings among races and class year.

Greg Johnson, assistant superintendent of curriculum, said of the report, "The primary takeaway is that we know our student population is using summer school differently, and we want to do everything we can to help kids get the most out of summer school."

One major conclusion of the evaluation was that students from different racial backgrounds use summer school differently. White students are more likely to attend summer school before their freshman year to smooth their adjustment to the new school and to get a leg up on course requirements. Those students return to summer school less in each year that follows. African American students, often trying to make up academic credits, predominantly attend summer school before their senior year, with lower participation rates in each of the preceding years.

Johnson says this reflects an access gap, not an achievement gap. "When a certain portion of the population, for example white families, are using summer school to get ahead, it opens up space during the school year for A.P. or dual-credit classes. Other families won't get that space. We're look-

ing at ways to change that gap. We need to make sure that we're providing children that access to courses."

The district is considering a pilot of a hybrid learning model as a possible way to bridge that gap. Johnson describes it as a hybrid between traditional "seat time" and distance learning on a Chromebook. "The students could get more time in a subject and go more in-depth but not have to be in school more hours."

Other important findings of the evaluation center on bridge programs. The 8 to 9 Connections pro-

"The primary takeaway is that we know our student population is using summer school differently."

— **Greg Johnson**

Asst. Supt. of curriculum

gram is one designed specifically to help students make the leap from middle school to high school. In 2018, 40 students enrolled in the 8 to 9 Connections Program and earned high school credit before entering their ninth-grade year. Of those students, four were white, 27 were African American, and the rest were His-

panic or multi-racial.

Johnson said enrollment in this program is voluntary and students are encouraged to enroll based on information from OPRF's feeder districts, Oak Park's District 97 and River Forest's District 90. "These are kids who we are told might benefit from learning executive function and good study habits. It's based on their track record in eighth grade: test scores, grades, behavior and attendance. It's a way to give these students a booster shot before they enter as freshmen."

A newer program in 2018, the A.P. Summer Bridge Program enrolled 28 students: three white, 11 African American, nine Latino, four multi-racial and one Asian/Pacific Islander. Some 73 percent of students who completed the summer course attempted their first semester in an A.P. English or history course in the fall. Johnson says of this program, "It's designed with much of the same philosophy as the 8 to 9 Connections but with older students. They are identified by their desire or a teacher recommendation to take an A.P. class. The focus of this program is to improve minority enrollment in our A.P. classes."

Johnson says that the majority population in the School Credit Recovery

Program of summer school were African American males. He describes ongoing changes to the program such as hiring teachers who are certified in multiple content areas and clustering classrooms closer to each other, so that students can reap the benefit of exposure to teachers in multiple subject areas.

He said, "We are doing our best to cover these classes with the right expertise. It's a population we know we need to do better by."

Another overall change in summer school? Declining enrollment. In 2017, 1,242 students enrolled in summer school. In 2018, that number was 1,083. Johnson says the school has been taking steps to address declining enrollment, and acknowledges those steps are not enough.

"We are trying to figure out the decrease in overall numbers. Some of that could be tied to changes we already made: we no longer offer health. We decreased financial literacy classes. But that doesn't explain the entire trend. We need to survey our families and get a better understanding of the courses they want to see. Our digital literacy class has been a great success, can we make that a bigger success?"

He points to changes made in 2018 that did not appear to have a positive impact on enrollment.

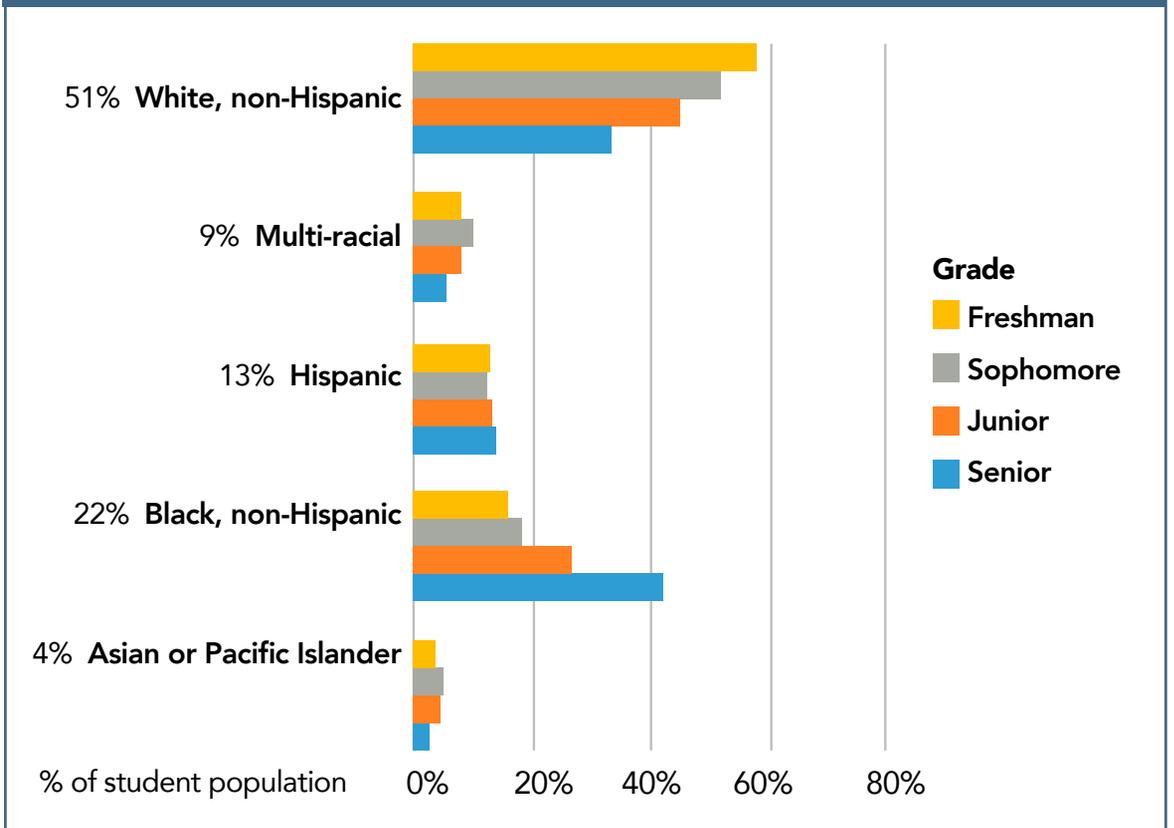
"Last year, we changed our registration process. When registration was only open during finite hours of the school day, classes filled up very quickly, and working parents might not have been able to access the system as easily."

He said the school also removed some of the enrollment caps on popular courses. "This didn't solve the problem. We don't know if we should remove caps for all courses, or should we offer different classes?"

At the end of the day, Johnson said the summer school evaluation will inform changes to summer school going forward. He said the evaluation is not a strategic plan. With the data from the evaluation in hand, he said, "Our big challenge moving forward is how to make a plan based on the report."

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2018 Summer School Racial Breakdown by Grade



(Data Source: Oak Park and River Forest High School District 200)

Inside OPRF's multifold effort to get more students of color into AP courses

Surveys, test scores, holistic registration and supports round out district's 3-pronged approach

By **MICHAEL ROMAIN**
Contributing Reporter

Over the last three years at Oak Park and River Forest High School, the number of African American students in advanced placement, or AP, courses has spiked. In 2016 and 2017 there were fewer than 70 black students in AP courses. In 2018 the total was 100 — a 33 percent increase.

That's important, because historically African American students have been grossly underrepresented in AP courses — unlike Latinx and Asian students, whose numbers in AP courses have been roughly on par with their representation among the general student population.

But there's room for improvement. There are still 11 percent fewer black

students in AP courses than there are in the general student body. For low-income students and students with individualized education plans (IEPs), the rate of underrepresentation is starker — 12 percent and 14 percent, respectively.

Greg Johnson, OPRF's assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, said that the district is addressing this reality through a three-pronged approach.

"First, we had all students take a survey in early October designed to help us get an idea of who is interested in taking AP courses in the coming school year," Johnson said.

The administrator said that "one



Julie Frey

of the most important predictors of success in higher level coursework is simply showing the willingness to take on the challenge and the grit to persist throughout the course." The survey, he added, is a way to help identify students who exhibit those qualities.

The second prong comprises district officials creating a list of students whose preliminary SAT results demonstrate that they have what the College Board — the organization that created AP — refers to as "AP potential," Johnson said.

Third, he said, the district is "taking a combination of these factors, along with teacher recommendations, to en-

courage students of color to enroll in AP and Honors courses through our registration process."

But what if qualities like grit and persistent are not so much innate but developed with the right amount of resources and time?

Johnson said that the district has a variety of support mechanisms in place, such as the tutoring center, professional development efforts and the new Huskie Scholar Academy, in order to help nurture and develop those qualities.

Implemented this school year, the Academy's mission is to "increase the number of historically underrepresented students who successfully complete" AP courses at OPRF, according to a statement on the district's website.

The Academy is led by a leadership

board that includes administrators, staff members, three teachers, three school counselors, three parents/community members and three students.

The program helps students of color "develop a sense of belonging and community within classes, the program, and the school," while focusing on "reducing micro aggressions and stereotype threat" and helps participants improve their test-taking and study skills.

"Our goal is to reach equity, defined by race ceasing to predict representation and performance in honors and AP courses," Johnson said. "We aren't picking a certain number of kids to reach this point, but instead working to promote the program and help encourage students who might not otherwise do so, to take on honors and AP work."

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SAVE THE DATE!

Join us at the next *SAY Connects* event,
at Julian Middle School, on Thursday,
January 17, 2019 at 7 p.m.
Program information coming soon!



Questions or Comments email us at say@oakpark.com