Board of Education Meeting Agenda Document Cover Sheet

Meeting Date: January 8, 2015

Agenda Item Title: **GHS Grade 9 English / Social Studies Course Update**

Name of Submitter: Dr. Chris Winters, Headmaster, GHS
Introduction:

The GHS administration has conducted two surveys to gauge student perception of our freshman courses. Although the surveys asked about all core academic areas, analysis going forward will hone in on freshman English and Social Studies classes.

The conclusions drawn by the GHS administration based on the 2012 survey were the following (numerous cautions about over-interpretation of the results were included in the full report of December 6, 2012):

- Our 113 English class is high performing and fairly homogeneous.
- All students can be appropriately challenged in the 113 class.
- Students identify their 113 class as appropriately paced.
- With our ninth grade program we have a built-in emphasis on transitioning into high school. Ninth grade English/Social Studies teams provide a unique, house-based experience. More than two levels would make it extremely hard to place 9th graders in any house-based classes.
- At GHS we believe that there is an inherent good in students experiencing a mix of peers.
- There are regular variations of grouping within the class.
- From previous success rates, 113 students fare well in further studies.

The conclusions drawn by the GHS administration based on the 2013 survey were the following (numerous cautions about over-interpretation of the results were included in the full report of November 13, 2014):

- For the vast majority at Greenwich High School, students at all levels perceive their freshman classes to be appropriately paced, to require roughly 30-60 minutes of homework per night, to be at the right level of intellectual challenge, and to somewhat prepare them for their sophomore classes.
- For students at the lower levels of academic performance (sophomores taking 211 or 212), while the pace and intellectual challenge are in the “just right” range, some perceive the classes to be slightly faster paced and slightly more intellectually challenging than the other groups of students.
- For students at the highest levels of academic performance (sophomores taking APUSH), some report that the pace is slightly slower, the intellectual challenge is slightly lower, and the skills preparations are slightly below the “somewhat prepared” response in English and Social Studies.

All data and charts are included in previous reports submitted to the BOE and are available on the GHS Website.
On November 13, 2014, the GHS administration proposed the addition of Advanced Placement World History and a corresponding English course to the list of freshman options. The rationale was to 1) meet the perceived needs of students at the highest levels of academic performance, 2) control enrollment through self-identification (and not administrator “gate keeping”), 3) meet the needs of students at the lowest levels of academic performance, and 4) maintain house-based placements as much as possible. After public discussion, this proposal was dropped from consideration and the BOE requested that the administration return with a different proposal.

The GHS administration prefers to leave the current two levels of freshman English and Social Studies in place. The administration is committed to the on-going adjustment of pace and intellectual challenge for all learners, the administration of surveys for additional trend data, and to further conversations with English and Social Studies teachers as to future options. Contributing to this recommendation is additional input from many students at the highest levels of academic performance. While the AP World History option was not preferred, many current and former “highest academic performers” voiced that the current two levels met their needs academically, in their adjustment to high school, and in the diversity of their experience at GHS. In addition, the Social Studies Department revised its World Themes Course in 2012. After piloting the new Global Studies Course in 2013-14, the course is being fully implemented this year. Additionally, the English Department has tweaked the English course each year to increase rigor without simply increasing the quantity of work. Many students and parents have reported, anecdotally, that changes have been well received and have increased the challenge at the highest levels.

Understanding that the freshman English and Social Studies courses remain a focal point for members in the community, the GHS administration proposes an alternative option and will be prepared to fully implement it should the BOE direct it to do so.

Proposal:

- During the 2015-2016 school year, pilot a third level--113 Advanced--of Global Studies and English.
- Limit enrollment in 113 Advanced to no more than 15% of the students (roughly 100).
- Drop house placement as a top priority in enrollment for 113 Advanced.
- Use student scores on a placement test to determine enrollment (see details of the placement test below).
- Deny all requests for an override of the placement recommendation into the class.
- Maintain the current 112 and 113 courses (but drop house placement as a top priority for enrollment).

Course Rationale:

113 Advanced will be an unweighted course designed to offer students the appropriate intellectual challenge and pace. Students will be expected to analyze historical and
literary perspectives using texts that go beyond the standard curriculum. Using past and current scholarship on course topics and themes, students will develop historical and literary knowledge, arguments, and divergent interpretations. They will be expected to work both independently and collaboratively to deepen critical thinking and analytical skills. The prerequisites for this course are entrance exams and teacher recommendations. The exams require students to synthesize sophisticated historical and literary documents in order to develop and support a claim.

**Additional Detail on 113 Advanced:**

**Placement:** All 8th grade students will be invited to take the placement exams. Participation in the placement process will be optional. Students choosing not to take the placement exams waive their right to reconsider entrance into the 113 Advanced level.

Placement will be based on four criteria:

- Performance on the COGAT - Test of Reasoning. The COGAT takes 30-40 minutes, is completed on-line, and costs $9.00 per student. Students complete analogies, sentence completion, and verbal classification. There are practice activities that are available to all.

- Performance on the IOWA Reading Comprehension Test. The IOWA takes 40 minutes, is completed on-line, and costs $12.00 per student. Results for the IOWA are available in one day.

- Performance on a written essay. GHS English and Social Studies teachers will use a commercially developed prompt or develop one in-house. Scoring of the essay will be completed by GHS English and Social Studies teachers using a rubric for evaluation and double scoring of each essay.

- 8th Grade English and Social Studies teacher recommendations.

**Timeline for placement:** Middle Schools will need to administer placement exams (COGAT, IOWA and the written essay) by January 31, 2015. Final placements will be made by February 15, 2015 and communicated to students. All placements will be final--the GHS override policy will not apply for this course level.

**Description of 113 Advanced Level:**

Additional detail of how 113 Advanced will differ from 113 will be fleshed out during the spring of 2015. Teachers already working on the 113 Advanced course are identifying areas where students will explore the current curriculum in greater depth and at a faster pace. The 113 curriculum will not be altered significantly.
Assessment:

We will assess the impact of the proposed pilot courses through the following:

- Performance on quarterly benchmark assessments in English and Social Studies in both freshman and sophomore years.
- Results of the sophomore survey administered each year: once at the end of freshman year and once in the middle of sophomore year.
- Results of a survey to parents of freshman (toward the end of freshman year) and sophomores (toward the end of sophomore year).
- Results of a survey to teachers of freshman and teachers of sophomores.
- Student performance on SBAC in junior year.