

Dear Parents:

Next year at Old Lincoln School, 9th graders will take a new required Social Studies course called [World History: Identity, Status, and Power](#) (WHISP). This course, offered without levels, replaces our old Pre-Modern World History honors and standard courses.

WHISP has three notable features:

1. We've built the course around enduring questions, rather than content coverage. We've selected case studies that illuminate complex and creative human answers to those questions. We will make systematic comparisons across time and space, so that students encounter historical and cultural difference in a scholarly, reflective way.
2. The new course will build modern skills more deliberately and comprehensively. We've designed this course around projects that will require students to collaborate with their peers, communicate in a variety of formats, and demonstrate creativity and flexibility. In other words, the classroom activities will better reflect the kinds of scholarly and professional work they will do as adults, while continuing to engage their native curiosity.
3. The new course will not group students by ability. Instead, we've designed the curriculum and pedagogy of this course to appropriately challenge all students in a way that pushes them without demoralizing them. We'll supplement our core readings with a variety of supports, and teach students to use those supports thoughtfully and economically. We will provide extensions that introduce students to advanced concepts and scholarship on our course themes and cases. Our goal is to make our course questions and classroom activities both accessible and stimulating for every student.

A dedicated team of teachers has worked for more than two years on the project of revising our 9th-grade offering. We were motivated to do this work by what we saw in our classes, what we learned from research and observations of other schools, and what we believe is best for all of our students.

Currently, 70% of BHS students enroll in our honors Pre-modern World History class. In effect, that class is already heterogeneously grouped. Students who are ready for advanced work in our field rarely find sufficient challenge in that setting, and too many students experience anxiety trying to perform in a class that was not designed to provide the articulation and scaffolds they need to be successful. In our current standard-level course, we group and label students who in fact fit any number of profiles: in need of accommodations, unlikely to complete homework, rationally choosing to balance their overall course schedules, and more. The unsavory artifact of all this has been stratification by race, class, and gender. And for many students, that stratification is persistent: once enrolled in our standard level, too many remain there.

In place of that default system, we are now planning to build on the diverse strengths, abilities, and interests of our students, and choosing to incorporate that diversity into the fabric of our course. We will engage all students in the core ideas of the past: how our predecessors made sense of identity, status, power, and wealth, and how their conceptions compare to our own. Each student can and will read at the right level of challenge and contribute meaningfully to projects that build on their strengths and push them where they need to get stronger.

We've visited and observed a number of schools, like Lexington High, that successfully teach all 9th-grade students together. Our team of 9th-grade teachers has been training and writing curriculum all year, and will continue to prepare through the summer for our roll-out in the fall. We're excited to be able to provide mutual support in classes next year for students who need remediation or extension.

Our students will inherit our world and our democracy. We want our Social Studies courses to prepare them for that awesome responsibility. At least once in their time at BHS, we will require students to grapple together, without regard for academic level, with questions about power, community, and identity. They will revisit these questions again as democratic citizens, a role and duty that admits no level designation. Our entire team of teachers is enthusiastic about the prospect.

Sincerely,

Gary Shiffman
Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator
Brookline High School
gary_shiffman@psbma.org