

# Schools pile on English, math classes

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The leather sleeves of his varsity jacket resting on the table, seventh-grader Brandon Wilson copied down the vocabulary words with his left hand. Formidable. Cacophony. Impenetrable.

He wrote out the pronunciation using a guide ("a, as in pad, bat"), and, with a stubby yellow pencil that had no eraser, he copied the meanings of the words from the New Webster's Student Dictionary.

This is one of three language arts classes Brandon takes every day at Adams Middle School in Richmond, and his second with teacher Deborah Brittain.

Across the room from the flat-screen computers where they take their quizzes, adjacent to the classroom's diminutive library, three massive metal pots sit on top of the fridge -- the last vestiges of the room's prior purpose: home economics.

Brandon flipped the pages of the dictionary.

"I wanted to take art or wood shop," Brandon said. "I'll get an elective next year."

Under federal pressure to increase scores on English and math tests, many low-achieving schools in the Bay Area and across the country are loading up students with two or even three periods of math and English and abandoning electives such as art, music and shop.

Most students at Crespi Middle School in Richmond take no history class, teachers say, because they are in multiple remedial math and English courses, casually known as double blocking. Nearly a third of Glenbrook Middle School in Concord takes an extra English or math class during school.

A recent study used Oakland's Havenscourt Middle School as a prime example of a school that cut down on other subjects to beef up math and reading time.

At Antioch Middle School in East Contra Costa, severe interventions have pushed social studies and science off some students' schedules entirely.

"The students are only taking English and math. They have completely thrown out science and history," said Antioch school district teacher Jason Ebner. "It's like saying all you need is water, you don't need food."

'The Gateway'

Giving students a double dose of the three R's sprouted up shortly after the No Child Left Behind law went into effect in 2002. The federal law requires that states test students in math and English each year, with penalties in place for schools that continually fail to pass muster.

Many popular intervention programs such as Read 180, in use at Adams, demand a solid 90 minutes of class time to work effectively. Many schools now use longer 90-minute classes. But schools still running on traditional 50-minute periods need to multiply the number of English classes a student takes to use these intervention programs.

Those who subscribe to these programs believe that spending more time on the basics, particularly English, represents a pathway to higher achievement overall. To excel in all subjects, students must know how to read and write.

"Literacy is the gateway to all the other courses," said Evie Groch, English language arts curriculum specialist in the Mt. Diablo Unified School District. "Sometimes you have to go slow to go fast."

At Glenbrook Middle School in Concord, 75 percent of students scored below the proficiency mark on state tests. Almost a third of the school's 660 students are enrolled in intervention courses that take the place of other subjects, said Principal Gary McAdam.

With fewer students left to take extras, Glenbrook gutted the kind of offerings students look forward to. The school no longer offers art, shop class or home economics, and it barely hung onto music.

"We have very few electives because there are so many remedial classes they have to take," McAdam said.

Glenbrook still runs a yearbook class, which seventh-grader Kiana Pearson wanted to take. But when the 12-year-old received her schedule, she found math intervention in place of an elective.

She says she does not resent the extra period of math.

"It's helped me learn," Kiana said.

Researchers and school districts are beginning to question whether a double dose really helps students improve overall.

"There's some point to that. You can't understand social science when you can't read," said Jack Jennings, executive director of the national Center on Education Policy based in Washington, D.C.

"But sometimes schools are doing it in a way that's drill and kill," he said. "And that turns kids off from education entirely."

The center studies the effects of No Child Left Behind across the country. In a 2006 survey, 71 percent of schools reported spending more time on English and math at the expense of other subjects. A new report exploring this topic is expected to be released in June.

"It certainly makes sense in the abstract that students who don't do well in math and English need more time in those subjects to learn the right skills," Jennings said. "But it depends on how they're taught these skills."

Three's a charm?

Like nearly half the schools in the West Contra Costa school district, Adams Middle School struggles each year to raise test scores.

A decade ago, the school morphed its homeroom or advisory period into Reading Renaissance. That means for third period, every student in the school, including Brandon, takes 30 minutes to sit and read books. They can earn points toward prizes -- beaded friendship bracelets, soccer balls, pencils -- enshrined in a glass case in the library.

But the English scores have failed to rise significantly. Last school year, three of every four students tested below grade level.

In January, new Principal Julian Szot ushered in Read 180, which requires a double block. During class, students rotate between three stations: group work at a table, silent reading alone and computerized exercises on DVD.

"They're on task, they're engaged," Szot said.

After filling out his vocabulary sheets, Brandon logged in, slipped the "Art Attack" disk into the drive and clicked a button labeled "Success Zone." He slipped on some headphones over the zigzag design shaved into his scalp.

Brandon breezed his way through the quizzes in minutes.

"I got 100 percent on my test," he said. He showed off a graph of how many words he has learned so far: 1,117.

Unlike most students in the intervention class, Brandon scored well on his achievement exams.

"He's very intelligent," said his mother, Lisa Jefferson. "But Brandon does not want to do his homework."

His grades dragged him down into remedial classes -- and shut him out of art.

"I feel for him," Jefferson said. However, she said she thinks the remedial classes will bring him up to speed and perhaps make him appreciate his art classes when he earns the right to take them again.

"I can't argue with it," Jefferson said. "He is in need of those skills."

History is in the past

Jason Ebner used to teach history at Antioch Middle School. That was before it became a thing of the past.

Six years ago, he said, the campus began requiring two math classes for low-performing students. The following year they doubled up English courses. Social studies and science fell by the wayside, he said.

The practice has come back to haunt Ebner, who now teaches sophomore world history at Antioch High School. His students, robbed of history in junior high, increasingly come in without knowledge of the Renaissance period.

In California, seventh-grade history should begin with the plagues and armor of the medieval era and close with the Age of Reason, when the supposed Enlightenment of mankind arose. Ebner leads them from the Enlightenment to World War II.

"But if they don't have any prep work, it's going to be lost on them," Ebner said.

Their gap in knowledge not only makes catching up harder, but it also will ultimately affect the school's state test scores in history.

"The program in middle school is dooming the high school," Ebner said. "They're setting us up for failure."

Middle schools aren't the only ones placing students in remedial classes.

The Mt. Diablo district directs schools to place struggling high school students into academic literacy courses based on their test scores. However, there are more restrictions: If a student takes too many remedial classes, they run the risk of missing vital credits needed for a diploma.

"It is a delicate balance," Groch said.

In the West Contra Costa school district, the school board's academic subcommittee is researching whether double blocking yields any positive academic results.

Adams Principal Julian Szot said he feels double blocking holds promise for his most-troubled students.

"From what I see, there's a lot of positive indicators that it will improve their skills in reading," he said.

But like most school reforms, nobody yet knows whether double blocking will pump up achievement.

"The impact on tests scores -- we'll see," Szot said.

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