

Secondary Level/Adolescent Program

Frequently Asked Questions

Academics

What math content is covered in the curriculum?

- Mathematical studies at the Secondary Level prepare students not only for high school but also for mathematical competence in everyday life as engaged members of society. Students explore a wide range of mathematical concepts through independent and group study, didactic lessons, and practical integration with economic production and exchange. In Math Seminar, students present on topics in Geometry, Algebra, Statistics, and Logic. Additionally, they work through a textbook at a pace determined by their individual learning goals. For most students, high school-level Algebra I forms the core of their mathematics study at the Secondary Level, though they also have the opportunity to explore high school Geometry, Trigonometry, Statistics, or Pre-Algebra based on their individual needs, pace, and learning profile.

How do students learn about literature at this age?

- We build upon their love of reading by analyzing literature and seeking deeper meaning from texts. For example, students participate in regular book discussions, during which they identify and discuss elements of literature, such as symbolism, themes, tone, point of view, rhetorical devices, etc. Example texts include *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Odyssey*, *The Pearl*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Alchemist*, and selections from Shakespeare. We also read aloud to students for the last half-hour of the school day.

What writing do students do?

- Writing is a daily requirement for our students. They write structured periodical responses to an article of their choosing, personal reflections, essays/analytical responses in conjunction with book discussion books, and independent study projects (ISP), which are long-term, formal research papers, to name a few examples.

When topics such as history, civics, art, and literature are taught, how do students learn to evaluate point of view and nuance?

- Students learn to analyze historical events through multiple perspectives and develop their understanding based on their reading of direct, primary sources. Our formal seminar is an essential tool in allowing the cohort of students to develop their own unique perspective on historical artifacts and documents. During Formal Seminar, readings from multiple and often opposing perspectives are presented. The students will read various primary sources and then come together for a student-driven discussion analyzing the text and developing their own conclusions.

How are periodicals chosen and handled for class reading?

- We subscribe to a range of periodicals to expose students to a wide variety of perspectives, as well as keep them abreast of current events. Students regularly analyze the effectiveness (and potential bias) of an author's presentation of their ideas in a structured, thesis-driven periodical response. These responses include an introduction, summary paragraph, analysis paragraph, and conclusion. The periodical responses function as miniature, formal essays.

What exactly are ISPs and how do they function in the classroom?

- The Independent Study Projects (ISPs) constitute a series of three formal papers that students write during their two years in the Secondary Level. These thesis-driven research papers require the students to write a proposal for their chosen area of study, do extensive research via academic databases, local libraries, as well as reputable online sources, and then develop an evidence-supported thesis statement. From there, students generate notecards to track the information from their sources, create a formal outline, make an MLA Works Cited page, handwrite a rough draft with in-text citations, edit and type a final draft, bind the essay into a book with original cover art, and finally present the topic to their peers using a visual element and a twenty-minute presentation.

Preparation for High School

Are there tests and quizzes?

- Tests and quizzes are one form of assessment that we use in monitoring student progress. In addition to being an assessment tool, the students are introduced to tests and quizzes so they can become accustomed to the process and be better prepared when they encounter them in the future. We help students develop study strategies that work for their individual needs. Tests and assessments function as mirrors to learn how to better study next time, not as definitions of a student's value.

Do students learn how to take tests?

- Yes. We introduce a variety of study strategies and help students determine the strategies that work best for their learning style. Additionally, students get ample repetition and practice through their work in the classroom, so the tests are celebrations of what they already know, as opposed to opportunities to memorize or cram the information into their short-term memory.

How does this program prepare students for high school?

- The work of Secondary Level prepares students for high school both academically, socially, and through the refinement of executive functions. Academically, the students are challenged with high school level mathematics, literature analysis, key skills and regular presentations of their knowledge. Socially, the students are presented with myriad opportunities to refine their "soft skills" and social-emotional development. Executively, students manage their time, build and manage profitable businesses, set learning goals, and work closely with us to bolster their capacity to accomplish their goals.

What does the transition to high school look like for individual students?

- Students that graduate from the Secondary Level program are prepared to transition strongly into any high school they choose to attend. Our alumni and their new teachers have reported excellent transitions into high school and beyond. Many students have told us the hardest part of the transition is figuring out how to use the combination lock for their new high school locker.

What is the timeline of high school related activity? (For eighth graders, and also for seventh graders so parents can answer their questions about the next year)

- This can vary depending on the school, but we recommend thinking about your student's choices for high school in seventh grade and communicating those ideas to us as soon as you know. We recommend working in partnership with your student to find the best fit and limiting their choices to three schools to avoid overwhelming the student..
- Certain high schools require standardized tests, such as the SSAT or HSPT. If any kind of standardized test coach is of interest to your family, beginning those sessions in the summer or early fall of their eighth-grade year is recommended. Standardized tests are generally administered in October, November, and December of their eighth-grade year. Depending on the school, application deadlines fall in December, January, or February of that same academic year. Decisions for high schools typically arrive in March.

What are open house dates for local private high schools that we can be aware of for seventh graders who want to get an early feel for their options?

- Open Houses and other admissions events vary by school, but generally happen in the fall. We collect and communicate those dates to our parent body as they arise. Additionally, parents should feel comfortable reaching out to the schools directly, as they are generally very willing to schedule individual meetings and/or tours.

Are all students prepared to enter public high school, or do teachers sometimes recommend smaller private schools for certain students?

- Due to the rigor and scope of the Secondary Level, those that complete the program are well prepared to enter not only the local public high schools, but also many other excellent private school options.
- We are happy to make recommendations for each student to guide them towards a high school that will best suit their needs if your family is exploring options beyond our well-regarded local public schools.

What is the process for making placement decisions, particularly for a child who may have opted out of taking a high school placement exam, such as the PreACT 8?

- The PreACT 8 is the placement exam offered by Lake Forest High School (LFHS) in the fall of a student's eighth grade year. While our students tend to do very well on this standardized exam, it is not required by LFHS. Instead, we work closely with the LFHS admissions team to recommend placement for students choosing to enroll there. Our

recommendations are the largest determinant of where they are placed. These conversations typically happen in the spring of their eighth grade year.

Trips

Why are the trips so important?

- Montessori education can be framed as a succession of increasingly robust stages of independence that help the children actualize skills and aspects of their personality. In the Secondary Level, these trips represent the ultimate stage of independence that they can achieve while in a pre-high school learning environment by providing them with difficult, adult-level work.
- Only when students are away from the family and overcoming challenges with their peer community can they truly experience the individual valorization (i.e., seeing their own innate value positively affecting the community) that comes with completing a trip successfully. This gives individual students the experience of working with peers to meet the needs of the group and, in turn, the group meeting the needs of the individual, all outside the protective shelter of the family environment. They gain a level of confidence in themselves that will be ingrained in their personality for the rest of their lives.
- The trips are an essential component of the program because they give students extensive opportunities to build resilience and confidence, as well as develop their executive functions and planning skills. Additionally, through these trips, students overcome challenging circumstances by working together. This collaboration creates deep bonds of trust and respect between members of the community that is leveraged for positive community collaboration throughout their work year-round.

What are the dates and locations of next year's trips? When do we receive that information?

- Students and parents receive our Secondary Level calendar in their summer packet, which includes all of the trip dates. Once the **fall** trip dates are scheduled, we will disseminate that information to parents the preceding spring. The locations and details about each trip are discussed with parents at Secondary Level Parent Evenings throughout the school year.

When will returning and incoming parents receive information about important trip details, such as location and activities for each trip, packing lists, and estimated cost of packing list procurement?

- As budding adults, the Secondary Level students are entrusted with much of this information as the trip approaches (while the timing of this varies by the trip and other logistics, we typically begin preparations about four weeks before we leave). They are then responsible for communicating those details to their parents and showing them the packing list as an added level of responsibility. We also discuss those details with parents at the Secondary Level Parent Evenings, which fall about one or two weeks before the trip. We are always available to answer questions by phone or in-person.

What are important dates that we can put on our calendars as early as possible, especially the trip return date teas during business hours?

- The Secondary Level calendar has the important dates for our classroom, including parent teas after the trips. The calendar is sent out in the summer. Secondary Level teas always fall on the last day of the trip. Parents go from the tea to Forest Bluff School to pick up their students at regular dismissal that day.

Social and Emotional Development

How can I expect my Secondary Level child to change as they enter adolescence?

- Students enter a new developmental plane when they become adolescents. Dr. Maria Montessori described adolescence as “the time when the child enters the state of adulthood and becomes a member of society” (*From Childhood to Adolescence*). At such a transitory time between childhood and adulthood, they are also quite vulnerable and deeply emotional. They are working to discover who they are in relation to their peers, to their parents, and to the other adults in their lives. Therefore, they might try on different hats and worry more astutely about how they are perceived by others. David Elkind, a child psychologist and professor emeritus at Tufts University, describes this hyperawareness as the “imaginary audience.” Adolescents feel that their peers are constantly watching and judging them, as if they are on stage all day every day.
- At this stage, they have an entirely new set of needs and characteristics. They need to feel that their work is valued and relevant, that their contributions to the community are seen and appreciated, and that they can be trusted with more responsibility from adults. Our model is one of side-by-side work, such that we facilitate large-scale, adult-level projects (e.g., the trips, Holiday Boutique, etc.) so that they understand what it means to function within an interdependent society. All of this work allows them to build a foundation of inner confidence and trust in themselves in the world that will serve them for the rest of their lives.

Why is the class so small compared to conventional school? Do adolescents need more social exposure at this age?

- Our program is intentionally small so that students hone their ability to successfully navigate social situations. In a larger community, a student might have the opportunity to ignore a problematic social situation and never learn from it, whereas in our program, they must work to reestablish trust and camaraderie in real time. This is especially true because the adult-level work we do in the program necessitates trust and collaboration between all members, adults included. By utilizing conflict resolution and communication strategies, students practice the quintessential skills of working alongside people who operate differently from you.

Why is this program so different from conventional middle school?

- The Secondary Level prepares students not only for high school but for life. In addition to learning the academic skills required by high schools, the students have myriad opportunities to develop their “soft skills,” concentration, and executive functioning.

- Some, but not all, of the soft skills they develop, which are difficult to develop consistently in other environments, include goal-setting, organizational skills, decision-making, communication, teamwork, resilience, patience, problem-solving, financial management, critical thinking, adaptability, stress management, time management, leadership, trustworthiness, creativity, conflict management, and emotional intelligence.

Home Life and After School

Should my child be doing organized sports and physical activities at this age, and, if so, how do you recommend fitting it in with school, homework, and socializing?

- Regular exercise is an important part of adolescent development and so all students are encouraged to prioritize their physical well-being every day. Team sports can be one way this is achieved, but we encourage parents to be discerning about the team culture in which the students participate.
- Team dynamics that have a dependency on social media for communication, toxic competitiveness, or culture of teasing should be avoided. These types of team cultures will present obstacles to your student's social-emotional development, negatively affect their academics and concentration in school, and the work of others in the classroom.
- Overscheduling can also present obstacles for students so be sure that whichever extracurricular activities are participated in, the student has enough time to complete their school-related responsibilities while staying well-rested and avoiding burn-out.

How are contributions to the home stressed and expanded upon in the Secondary Level?

- As a student ages, they should be given additional responsibilities at home. The specific responsibilities may look different for every family, but it is important that parents expect their students to contribute in meaningful ways at home. Students who engage actively in the home tend to demonstrate better time management and executive function skills. Additionally, now that your student is participating in trip planning, making lunches for the class, etc., they are more than prepared to engage in that kind of work at home. For example, perhaps they plan a trip for your family or cook dinner twice a week. This kind of parallel work in the home and in the classroom is highly beneficial.

Do the students have homework?

- In the Secondary Level, work at home includes academic study, reading, household chores, and self-enrichment. The standard for homework is two hours of concentrated work each night. We recommend at least one hour of reading, with the other hour devoted to personal enrichment, household contributions, or school work, depending on the needs of the student. Personal enrichment can include developing a skill, such as playing an instrument, or studying a topic of personal interest. The overall goal is to create a routine at home focused on bolstering capacity for concentration, while also developing a skill or ability. The use of high stimulation media or technology has proven to have dramatically negative effects on students' ability to concentrate and perform well across all areas of their life. It is for these reasons that we strongly discourage all engagement in the consumption of short-form, passive media during those two hours.

Do the students really do two hours of homework every single night?

- Two hours is the standard we set for work at home. Students will need varying lengths of time to form this habit. We know that their high school experiences will require at least two hours, and likely more, for homework, alongside extracurricular activities. To best prepare them for this reality, we work to develop the *habit* of quiet, concentrated work at home. As parents, you will need to help your students form that habit by enforcing boundaries and emphasizing it as an important value in your home.

Technology

Do the students use computers at school? Should they have access to them at home?

- We have two desktop computers in the classroom, which function to support student research, typing practice, and small business endeavors (e.g., Photoshop, Lightroom). Computers at this age are developmentally-appropriate and also constitute an immense privilege, one that can be taken away if abused.
- We work alongside students to orient them to these tools. For example, we show students how to draft professional emails, format their papers, use programs to support their business endeavors (e.g., Lightroom for editing school photographs), access academic databases, and find credible sources for their independent study projects (ISPs), to name a few.
- While some families choose to allow access to a computer at home to support their school work, it is not necessary, as they can accomplish those goals in the classroom. If families choose to allow access to a computer, the boundaries should be very clear and reiterated often. We strongly encourage their two hour work period at home to be screen-free or -limited if a computer must be used. At school, students access the computers for 20-minute slots at a time to support concentration and avoid eye strain.

What is the policy or recommendations for personal device use and technology for students?

- We strongly recommend that all students in the Secondary Level refrain from using cell phones or tablets for any use other than calling or texting their peers within normal boundaries of etiquette and kindness.
- In almost all cases, there is no reason any student in the program should have a personal cell phone, laptop, or tablet.
- For parents who need their child to be reachable for safety reasons, we recommend a smartwatch (for use outside of school only) that has messaging and calling functions without the capacity to download apps that could become destructive distractions.
- Communication technology should only be used by students when closely supervised by a parent. Communicating via electronics represents a brand new way of expressing themselves and interpreting others' meaning and intention. They need your regular guidance in making sure they are utilizing this technology productively and appropriately, as well as understanding the meaning of their digital footprint and how it affects others. In

some cases we recommend parents and students draft a technology agreement that outlines specific uses and constraints of the devices. If you'd like help setting up monitoring or parental controls, please contact us for support.

- We have observed that the majority of modern video games diminish students' capacity for extended concentration, self-initiation, and reinforce addictive tendencies. If your student is struggling to find hobbies or other activities to occupy their time, please reach out for support.

Independence and Accountability

What happens if a student misses a deadline? How is accountability handled?

- We design the classroom such that there are natural consequences for missing deadlines. For example, we often assign research projects that culminate in a presentation to the class. If a student is unprepared for that presentation, it is quite obvious to everyone in the room. Additionally, we communicate with students directly if we notice a missed deadline and work with them to schedule a new deadline. In some cases, we might modify their choices of work until that missed assignment is done.
- We understand that certain times of year can be busy for students, and unusual circumstances can arise, so we encourage students to ask for an extension if needed. Self-advocacy and communication are essential skills in any work environment.

Do students use journals or planners?

- In the Secondary Level, students plan their day using a weekly / monthly planner. This is different from the Upper Elementary classroom, in which students record what they did at the end of the day in a journal. Instead, Secondary Level students start their morning by setting goals for themselves and tracking deadlines in their planners. Planning how they will use their time helps develop strong executive functioning and prepares them for managing their work endeavors through high school and into their adult life.
- Journals, on the other hand, are used for periodical responses, creative writing, personal reflections, note-taking, etc.

What are the checkpoints for students when they are doing independent work to make sure they are getting work done?

- We observe students closely to see how they are spending their time and what work they might be avoiding. We check in with students regularly and schedule longer meetings with them to discuss their goals and work habits.

What is the accountability for getting homework done if a student resists the two hour work period at home?

- Collaboration between teachers and parents is critical if this situation arises. Adolescents are apt to push back against boundaries. We view the parents' job at home to enforce the habit of a quiet, concentrated work period, rather than to manage what they work on. Still, if a student is struggling to build the habit, please reach out to us for support and we can help identify strategies and logical consequences. For example, perhaps they cannot go

to a friend's house until they participate in their work period for a set period of time. Parents should feel comfortable holding strong boundaries in this area, as we know they will need a developed work habit going into high school and beyond.