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# spotlight 

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## Elective Surgery

Budget deficits require elected officials to reassess course offerings

K $\mathbb{E}$ Y F C $T$ S: • During the 2009-10 school year, North Carolina's public schools offered nearly 540 different courses, nearly a 100-course increase from ten years ago.

- According to course membership data for the 2009-10 school year, North Carolina public schools had 208 undersubscribed high school courses, 65 undersubscribed middle school courses, and twelve undersubscribed elementary school courses.
- A statewide curriculum audit would be a sound way to reduce costs and refocus our curriculum on core skills.

in 2007, the John Locke Foundation published, "Reading, Writing, and Handbells: Course Enrollment in the Era of No Child Left Behind. ${ }^{11}$ That study highlighted courses and enrollment for eleven specialty courses offered in North Carolina public schools. In Table 1, state course membership data for the 2009-10 school year has been added to figures from the 2007 study.

Six of the eleven specialty classes had an increase in the number of courses, and five had an increase in enrollment. African American Studies, American Indian Studies, and Human Geography had the greatest gains in courses and enrollment, while Handbells, Minority Studies, and Film Production had the largest declines. Latino American Studies was discontinued, presumably for lack of interest.

Unfortunately, few North Carolinians are aware that the state and local education officials continue to increase the number of specialty courses offered in our public schools. In 2000-01, North Carolina public schools offered approximately 450 course options. By 2005-06, the state increased course options to about 500 courses. ${ }^{2}$ During the 2009-10 school year, North Carolina's public schools offered nearly 540 different courses, nearly a 100 -course increase from ten years ago. ${ }^{3}$ The Appendix to this report lists all courses offered during the 2009-10 school year.

Because no formal definition exists, I define an undersubscribed course as

Table 1. Examples of Specialty Course Enrollment, 2005-06 and 2009-10

| Specialty Course | $2005-06$ <br> Courses | $2009-10$ <br> Courses | Percentage <br> Change | $2005-06$ <br> Enrollment | $2009-10$ <br> Enrollment | Percentage <br> Change |
| :--- | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| African American Studies | 122 | 304 | $+149 \%$ | 2,857 | 3,189 | $+12 \%$ |
| American Indian Studies | 7 | 33 | $+371 \%$ | 123 | 265 | $+115 \%$ |
| Electronic Music | 37 | 36 | $-3 \%$ | 418 | 494 | $+18 \%$ |
| Film Production | 78 | 62 | $-21 \%$ | 1,144 | 734 | $-36 \%$ |
| Folk Arts | 84 | 85 | $+1 \%$ | 1,885 | 1,822 | $-3 \%$ |
| Geography in Action | 32 | 38 | $+19 \%$ | 708 | 740 | $+5 \%$ |
| Handbells | 40 | 24 | $-40 \%$ | 548 | 328 | $-40 \%$ |
| Human Geography | 58 | 130 | $+124 \%$ | 1,319 | 2,502 | $+90 \%$ |
| Latino American Studies | 2 | $\mathrm{~N} / \mathrm{A}$ | $\mathrm{N} / \mathrm{A}$ | 3 | $\mathrm{~N} / \mathrm{A}$ | $\mathrm{N} / \mathrm{A}$ |
| Minority Studies | 97 | 56 | $-42 \%$ | 1,788 | 902 | $-50 \%$ |
| Social Problems | 78 | 185 | $+137 \%$ | 1,439 | 1,307 | $-9 \%$ |

one that has had 50 or fewer classes offered statewide. If we apply this standard to course membership data for the 2009-10 school year, North Carolina public schools had 208 undersubscribed high school courses, 65 undersubscribed middle school courses, and twelve undersubscribed elementary school courses. ${ }^{4}$

## Background

Issues like class size, administrative personnel, support staff, and teacher compensation have dominated discussions about potential cuts to North Carolina's K-12 budget. Because all four represent significant expenditures in the budget, it is reasonable for legislators, policymakers, and educators to consider the fiscal and educational impact of increasing class sizes, eliminating administrative and support staff, and changing the way that state and local governments pay teachers.

Course offerings and electives have not been part of the discussion. The reasons are simple. Few have examined or questioned the claims, often articulated by public school advocates and elected officials, that elective courses have been in decline in an era of increasing accountability and testing mandates. ${ }^{5}$ Additionally, the public often takes the purported educational benefits of the electives for granted. Many North Carolinians believe that multiple course offerings have served as an effective dropout prevention strategy. In addition, they trust that electives have reinforced and enhanced content taught in core subjects like English, math, science, and social studies. ${ }^{6}$

Linda Bost, principal of Davie High School, articulated the dropout prevention argument best. In an article highlighting dropout prevention strategies, she commented, "For many students, taking electives is the only reason they [disengaged students] come to school." ${ }^{7}$

A 2007 report, Raise the Graduation Rate: A Call to Action, echoed Bost's opinion. Among the many recommendations offered by the report, State Superintendent June Atkinson urged school districts to require a "rigorous and relevant course of study with engaging electives for each student" as a way to prevent dropouts. ${ }^{8}$

Neither Bost nor Atkinson, however, presented quantitative data that suggested a direct relationship between electives and dropouts.

Indeed, the relationship between electives and dropouts is logical and compelling, but ultimately falls short. Graduation rates and test scores were not necessarily lower during periods when schools offered fewer electives. Likewise,
student performance has not increased in concert with the dramatic rise in electives over the last decade.
Elsewhere, officials at the NC Department of Public Instruction argued that electives reinforce and teach basic skills in new ways:

Special areas, including each of the four arts areas, foreign language, career technical education, health and physical education provide students with multiple ways to communicate beyond standard written and verbal expression and allow for students to express their knowledge and understandings in various ways. The thinking processes used in special area classes are processes which transfer and apply across subject areas. 9

The authors of The Balanced Curriculum: A Guiding Document for Scheduling and Implementation of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study at the Middle School Level pointed out that many of the concepts learned in electives are applicable to core subject classes. For example, the use of patterns and fractions in music may allow students to better grasp concepts used in math or science. ${ }^{10}$

Because of the potential for electives to supplement instruction in the core subjects, a wholesale rejection of electives is not educationally sound. North Carolina's 1.5 million students should have access to electives in the visual and performing arts, foreign languages, and career and technical education, as well as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. Nevertheless, there must be close collaboration between core and elective teachers. In schools where such collaboration does not exist, electives may do little to enhance basic skills.

The desirability of reducing electives and course offerings does not mean that state education officials have the authority to do so. After all, the North Carolina Constitution requires the state public school system to provide a "sound basic education." According to the Hoke County Board of Education v. State (also known as Leandro), electives are secondary to this requirement:
[T]he right to the equal opportunity to a sound basic education, is only to the sound basic education, not the frills and whistles. The State Constitution does not require that children be provided a prep school education, nor that children be provided the courses and experiences to enable them to go to Yale or Harvard. While there is no restriction on high-level electives, modern dance, advanced computer courses and multiple foreign language courses being taught or paid for by tax dollars in the public schools, the Constitutional guarantee of a sound basic education for each child must first be met. ${ }^{11}$

The ruling identified an important reason why state education leaders urged school systems to offer numerous electives:

The political and educational "leadership" apparently were terrified that being required to consider successful at-risk educational practices, and if necessary, re-allocate existing resources from programs not mandated by the constitutional requirement as amplified by the Leandro doctrine would, according to Phil Kirk, chairman of the State Board of Education, ... "drive more of the brighter students away from public schools into private education." ${ }^{12}$

Put simply, the courts concluded that state and local school leaders rushed to provide electives in an attempt to maintain their client base at the expense of at-risk students. Unfortunately, Howard Manning, a Wake County Superior Court judge who presides over Leandro, has yet to question state officials about the vast expansion of courses and electives offered to North Carolina public school students.

## Conclusion

In 1985, the state established the Basic Education Program to ensure that all students have access to a core set of classes. The Basic Education Program describes the education program that must be offered to every child in the North

Table 2. High School Electives outlined in the NC Basic Course of Study


Carolina public schools. This ensures that all students have equal access to the arts, communication skills, physical education and personal health and safety, mathematics, media and computer skills, science, second languages, social studies, and vocational and technical education courses. ${ }^{13}$

Under the updated Basic Education Program for North Carolina's Public Schools published in 1994, North Carolina education officials recommended that high schools offer 56 electives (see Table 2). ${ }^{14}$ Some of the courses recommended in 1994, particularly those in the visual arts, are no longer consistent with the needs of North Carolina's economy. Courses listed in areas such as math, science, and social studies provide a reasonable starting point for developing electives that meet the academic needs of students.

There is no evidence that school districts or the state have conducted an audit of the costs and outcomes of elective courses. A statewide curriculum audit would be a sound way to reduce costs and refocus our curriculum on the core skills that many of our public school students so desperately need.

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## End Notes

1. Terry Stoops, "Reading, Writing, and Handbells: Course Enrollment in the Era of No Child Left Behind," John Locke Foundation Spotlight No. 332, September 13, 2007, johnlocke.org/research/show/spotlights/181.
2. Ibid., p. 2.
3. As I pointed out in "Reading, Writing, and Handbells" (p. 3): "There are many factors accounting for the increase. Online courses have increased the number of courses available to students. Initiatives like the Learn and Earn, International Baccalaureate, and Advanced Placement programs have increased the number of students enrolling in advanced and postsecondary level courses. Furthermore, some public-school systems have responded to the job market by offering courses that meet the changing demands of business, industry, and human services. In addition, thematic and charter schools have multiplied in recent years, and these schools offer students unique class offerings and courses of study. Finally, public schools have complied with interest groups that want to expose children to political or social ideologies."
4. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI), Financial and Business Services, "2009-2010 Course Membership Summary," January 2010.
5. Winnie Hu, "High Schools Add Electives to Cultivate Interests," The New York Times, Oct. 26, 2008, www.nytimes.com / 2008/10/27/ education / 27electives.html. See also NC DPI, The Balanced Curriculum: A Guiding Document for Scheduling and Implementation of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study at the Middle School Level [Draft], pp. 54-56, 2005: "In this age of high stakes testing and accountability, combined with tight budgets, schools have been forced to establish priorities with how they will serve their students. While the thinking may be that reduced class size and extra help in tested areas will improve students' achievement on standardized tests, the cost of eliminating special programs to provide these things will be damaging to students' overall development and education. Between the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years, there was a net loss of nine elective courses offered to North Carolina's public school students. While the state eliminated courses like Agricultural Production III, students had access to new courses, such as Arabic I, AOF225 Securities, AOF230 Insurance. As mentioned earlier in this paper, longer-term trends show that the number of electives has skyrocketed."
6. SL 2002-178. In 2002, the General Assembly unanimously passed Session Law 2002-178, which ordered the State Board of Education to examine "[t]he examination of the appropriateness of electives and exploratory courses at the middle school level."
7. NC DPI, "Davie High Pulls Out All the Stops to Reduce Dropout Rate," April 2002, www.ncpublicschools.org/best_practices/0204_feature. html.
8. June Atkinson, Raise the Graduation Rate: A Call to Action, September 2007, www.ncpublicschools.org/statesuperintendent [Cached].
9. NC DPI, The Balanced Curriculum: A Guiding Document for Scheduling and Implementation of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study at the Middle School Level [Draft], pp. 54-56, 2005.
10. Ibid.
11. Hoke County Board of Education v. State, 95 CVS 1158 (N.C. Super. Ct. 26 March 2001), slip op., 68, p. 77.
12. Ibid., Section Four - Hoke County \& Beyond - Judgment, p. 11.
13. NC General Statutes, $\S 115 \mathrm{C}-81$ et a1.
14. NC State Board of Education, The Basic Education Program for North Carolina's Public Schools, 1994, pp. 50-51, www.ncpublicschools.org/ basic_ed_plan.

## Appendix. 2009-10 K-12 Courses

| Language Arts and Foreign Language | Math; Computer <br> Science; and Science | Social Studies | Arts | Business | Agriculture; Family \& Consumer Sciences; and Health | Trades \& Technology | Other Courses |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| Reading | Math (K-8) | Social Studies (K-8) | Dance Education (K-8) | Career Development Pilot Program | Agriculture Pilot Program | Intro. to Trade \& Industrial Education | Self-Contained |
| Language Arts | Accelerated Middle School Math | Government \& Politics: Comparative | Dance I (9-12) | Career Management | Agriscience Applications | Trade \& Industrial Pilot Program | Individualized Curriculum |
| Speech I | Fundamental Mathematics I | Government \& Politics: United States | Dance II (9-12) | Exploring Career Decisions | Agricultural Production I | Automotive Service Technology I | Language Arts/Math |
| Speech II | Fundamental Mathematics II | International Relations | Dance III (9-12) | Career Development Internship | Agricultural Production II | Automotive Service <br> Technology II | Language Arts/Math/ Science |
| Debate | Technical Mathematics I | U.S. Studies (General) | Dance IV (9-12) | Principles Of Business \& Personal Finance - BE | Animal Science I | Automotive Service Technology III | Language Arts/Math/ Social Studies |
| English I | Technical Mathematics II | Minority Studies | Special Topics Dance I (9-12) | Exploring Business Technologies | Animal Science II | Collision Repair Technology I | Language Arts/Social Studies |
| English II | Foundations of Algebra | Special Interest Social Studies | Special Topics Dance II (9-12) | Business Pilot Program | Animal Science II <br> - Small Animals | Collision Repair Technology II | Math/Science |
| English III | Foundations of Advanced Algebra | African American Studies | Dance History (9-12) | Business Law | Equine Science I | Aerospace I | Science/Physical Education (Health) |
| English IV | Introductory Mathematics | American Indian Studies | Independent Study in Dance | Business Management and Applications | Equine Science II | Aerospace II | Social Studies/Science |
| Special Interest English (Composition) | Algebra I-A | Local/State History | General Music (K-12) | Int Baccalaureate (IB) Business Mgmt - BE | Exploring Biotechnology | Aerospace III | Social Studies/Science/ Health (P.E.) |
| Special Interest English (Language) | Algebra I-B | U.S. History | Music Theory (10-12) | Small Business/ <br> Entrepreneurship - BE | Agricultural Mechanics I | Diesel Mechanics I | Music/Art |
| Special Interest English (Literature) | Algebra I | European History | Music History/ Appreciation (9-12) | Computerized Accounting I | Agricultural Mechanics II | Diesel Mechanics II | Healthful Living (K-8) |
| Special Interest English (Reading) | Algebra II | World History | Vocal Music I | Computerized Accounting II | Agricultural Mechanics <br> III - Small Engines | Marine Occupations I | Proj Lead The Way-Intro to Engineering Design |
| Special Interest English (Other) | Advanced Functions And Modeling | Bible History | Vocal Music II | Foundations of Information Technology | Agricultural Education Special Interest | Marine Occupations II | Proj Lead The <br> Way-Principles Of <br> Engineering |
| Journalism I | Foundations Of Geometry | IB History of Americas | Vocal Music III | Networking I-BE | Horticulture I | Furniture/Cabinet Making I | Proj Lead The WayDigital Electronics |
| Journalism II | Geometry | IB 20th Century History | Vocal Music IV | Network Administration I-Linux | Horticulture II - General | Furniture/Cabinet Making II | Proj Lead The WayComputer Integrated Manufacturing |
| American Literature, <br>  <br> Composition | Trigonometry | IB International History | Orchestral | Network Administration II - Microsoft | Horticulture II - Turf Grass | Furniture/Cabinet Making III | Proj Lead The WayCivil Engineering \& Architecture |
| British Literature, Language \& Composition | Discrete Mathematics | Geography | Orchestra II | AOF105 Introduction to Financial Services | Environmental \& Natural Resources I | Electronics I | Proj Lead The WayBiotechnical Engineering |
| English Language and Composition | Integrated Mathematics I | World Geography | Orchestra III | AOF110 Economics and the World of Finance | Environmental \& Natural Resources II | Electronics II | Proj Lead The WayAerospace Engineering |
| English Literature and Composition | Integrated Mathematics II | Human Geography | Orchestra IV | AOF115 Banking and Credit |  <br> Agriscience Research I | Metals Manufacturing I | Proj Lead The WayEngineering Design \& Development |
| English as a Second Language | Integrated Mathematics III | Geography In Action | Band I | AOF210 Financial Planning | Biotechnology \& Agriscience Research II | Metals Manufacturing II | Exploring Technology Systems |
| French I | Integrated Mathematics IV | Citizenship Education | Band II | AOF225 Securities | Horticulture II Landscape Construction | Metals Manufacturing III | Fundamentals of Technology |
| French II | Special Topics In Math | Current Affairs and Issues | Band III | AOF230 Insurance | Agriculture <br> Apprenticeship Program | Electro-Mechanical Technology I | Manufacturing Systems |
| French III | Probability and Statistics | American Government (10-12) | Band IV | AOF235 International Finance | Agricultural Cooperative Program | Electro-Mechanical Technology II | Communications Systems |
| French IV | AP Statistics | Law Related Studies (10-12) | Jazz Ensemble (9-12) | Business Computer Technology | Agricultural Internship | Welding Technology I | Transportation Systems |
| French V | Pre-Calculus | Contemporary Law and Justice | Electronic Music | Computer Applications I | Agricultural Advanced Studies | Welding Technology II | Structural Systems |
| Chinese I | IB Math Studies 1 | Economics (10-12) | Guitar | Computer Applications II | University Agricultural Education | Welding Technology III | Technology Education Special Interest |
| Chinese II | IB Math Studies 2 | Consumer Economics | Piano | Computer Applications III | Community College Business/Marketing/ Agriculture | Masonry I | Technology Apprenticeship Program |


| Language Arts and Foreign Language | Math; Computer Science; and Science | Social Studies | Arts | Business | Agriculture; Family \& Consumer Sciences; and Health | Trades \& Technology | Other Courses |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| Chinese III | Fifth Year Math | Civics and Economics | Handbells | E-Commerce I | Family \& Consumer Sciences - Pilot Program | Masonry II | Technology Internship |
| Chinese IV | IB Math Methods 2 | Economics: Macro | Independent Study In Music | E-Commerce II | Teen Living | Masonry III | University Technology Education |
| Spanish I | AP Calculus (AB) | Economics: Micro | Creative Dramatics (K-8) | Computer Programming <br> I-VB Net | Exploring Life Skills | Construction Technology <br> I | Community College Industrial Technology |
| Spanish II | AP Calculus (BC) | Sociology | Introduction to Theatre Arts (9-12) | Computer Programming II - VB Net | Apparel Development I | Construction Technology II | Physical Education (K-8) |
| Spanish III | Math HI I IB | Social Problems | Theatre Arts I (9-12) | Computer Programming <br> I- Other Languages | Apparel Development II | Construction Technology III | Health Education (K-8) |
| Spanish IV | Math HIII IB | Community Action Projects (Internships) | Theatre Arts II (9-12) | Computer Programming <br> II - Other Languages | Foods I- Fundamentals | Electrical Trades I | Health/Physical Education (Required 9-12) |
| Spanish V | IB Math Methods I | World Religions | Theatre Arts III (9-12) | IB Information Technology | Foods II - Advanced | Electrical Trades II | Health Education (Elective 9-12) |
| German I | Community College <br> - 4Th Math | Anthropology | Theatre Arts IV (9-12) | Data Base Programming <br> I- Oracle Academy | Housing \& Interiors I | Air Condition/ Refrigeration I | Physical Education <br> (Elective 9-12) |
| German II | Community College Math | Psychology | Technical Theatre I (9-12) | Data Base Programming II - Oracle Academy | Housing \& Interiors II | Air Condition/ Refrigeration II | Health/Physical Education (Elective 9-12) |
| German III | Computer Skills/ Education | IB Psychology II | Technical Theatre II (9-12) | Bus and Info Tech Ed Special Interest | Parenting and Child Development | Air Condition/ Refrigeration III | Community College Healthful Living |
| German IV | Fundamentals of Computer Programming | Humanities | Theatre History (9-12) | AOIT105 Introduction to Information Technology | Foods II - Food Science | Plumbing I | JROTC I |
| German V | AP Computer Science A | Contemporary Issues In NC History | Acting (9-12) | AOIT110 Web Page Design | Life Management | Plumbing II | JROTC II |
| Japanese I | AP Computer Science AB | Community College Social Studies | Directing (9-12) | AOIT120 Digital Networks | Financial Education | Cosmetology Introduction | JROTC III |
| Japanese II | Community College Computer Science |  | Play Production (9-12) | AOIT125 Systems Support and Maintenance | Family \& Consumer Sciences Special Interest | Cosmetology I | JROTC IV |
| Japanese III | Science (K-8) |  | Independent Study in Theatre Arts | AOIT210 Digital Media | CC Family \& Consumer Science | Cosmetology II | Religion Related |
| Japanese IV | Physical Science |  | Visual Arts (K-8) | AOIT220 Programming II | Early Childhood Education I | Trade and Industrial Cooperative Training I | SAT Preparation |
| Russian I | Biology |  | Visual Arts I (9-12) | CC Business Technologies | Early Childhood Education II | Trade and Industrial Cooperative Training I | Teacher Cadet I |
| Russian II | Biology II (2nd Yr) |  | Visual Arts II (9-12) | Keyboarding | Culinary Arts and Hospitality I | Law Enforcement I | Teacher Cadet II |
| Arabic I | Anatomy |  | Visual Arts III (9-12) | Digital Communications Systems | Culinary Arts and Hospitality II | Law Enforcement II | Library/Media Assistance |
| Latin I | Anatomy And Physiology |  | Visual Arts IV (9-12) | Business and Electronic Communications | Family \& Consumer <br> Sciences Apprenticeship | CC Trade \& Industrial | Special Interest Topics (Mini-Courses) |
| Latin II | IB Biology III |  | Fine Crafts (9-12) | BE - Apprenticeship Program | Family \& Consumer Sciences Cooperative Program | Scientific \& Technical Visualization I | Sports Medicine/Athletic Training |
| Latin III | Animal Behavior |  | Ceramics (9-12) | Business Cooperative Program | Family \& Consumer Sciences Internship | Scientific \& Technical Visualization II | CASEE (Curriculum Assistance \& Skills For Employ) |
| Latin IV | Botany |  | Graphic Design (9-12) | Business Internship | Family \& Consumer Sciences Advanced Studies | Printing Graphics I | Extended Day Diversified Cooperative Training |
| Exploratory Languages | Genetics |  | Photography (9-12) | Business Advanced Studies | Biomedical Technology | Printing Graphics II | Career Training for Exceptional Children |
| Other Foreign Languages I | Microbiology |  | Film Production (9-12) |  <br> Personal Finance - ME | Exploring Biotechnology | Drafting I | Internship |
| Other Foreign <br> Languages II | North Carolina Wildlife |  | Electronic Art (9-12) | Marketing Pilot Program | Health Occupations Pilot Program | Commercial Art I | IBTheory of Knowledge |
| Other Foreign Languages III | Zoology |  | Art History (9-12) | Small Business/ <br> Entrepreneurship - ME | Health Team Relations | Commercial Art II | Virtual High School Courses |
| Other Foreign <br> Languages IV | Life Science |  | Art History and Appreciation | Marketing | Allied Health Sciences I | Digital Media I | Community College Courses |
| Community College Language Lab | Earth/Environmental Science |  | Studio Art: Drawing (9-12) | Marketing Management | Allied Health Sciences II | Digital Media II | University Courses |



