

Geneva High School

Memorandum

TO: Dr. Mutchler
Dr. Barrett
Mrs. Sims

FROM: Tom Rogers on behalf of Geneva High School

DATE: December 2, 2015

RE: Recommendations from the GHS Final Exam Study Committee

CC: GHS Department Chairs

During the 2014-2015 school year, a committee of GHS administrators and teachers from every department was formed to evaluate a number of questions relating to final exams at Geneva High School. These questions included:

- What are the different purposes that final exams serve at GHS?
- What types of assessments should qualify as final exam assessments at GHS?
- Who should take final exams at GHS?
- When should final exams be administered at GHS?
- What value (as a percent of the final grade) should final exams have at GHS?
- Is our existing final exam schedule appropriate at GHS?

As part of the study, the GHS committee sought input and feedback from a variety of stakeholders and sources, including:

- Students
- Parents
- Teachers
- Department Chairs
- Building Leadership Team
- GEA Leadership
- Department of Learning and Teaching
- Other high schools

At this point the committee has studied, sought feedback on, and discussed all of the questions that are part of this study and have made a number of recommendations that pertain to final exams. These recommendations follow.

Question #1: What are the different purposes that final exams serve at GHS?

To answer this question, members of the committee sought feedback from their departmental colleagues before discussing as a group. The committee identified a number of commonalities between different departments and faculty members. After discussion, the committee reached consensus on the following purpose statement:

The purpose of final assessments at Geneva High School is to enhance student learning by:

- *Prompting students to revisit, think critically about, discuss, and apply key concepts and skills;*
- *Fostering a “big picture” understanding of course concepts and content;*
- *Evaluating cumulative student learning; and*
- *Preparing students for similar assessments at the collegiate level*

This purpose statement closely aligns with the District 304 Vision Statement, as our belief is that student preparation for final assessments serves an important role in student learning. This purpose statement guided our discussion regarding the other portions of our study.

Question #2: What types of assessments should qualify as final exam assessments at GHS?

We have known for many years that some of our courses use objective-based exams as their final assessments, while other courses use assessments such as:

- Essays
- Final projects
- Presentations
- Lab practicals
- Free response questions
- Listening and speaking assessments
- Portfolios
- Other performance-based assessments
- Assessments that combine multiple components

The committee believes that this variety is a good thing for students. **Recommendations – The committee recommends that we:**

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continue to embrace multiple ways of assessing students at the end of each semester• Refer to these assessments not as “final exams” but rather “final assessments” |
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Question #3: Who should take final exams at GHS?

Currently, senior students in their spring semester are not expected to take final assessments. This practice dates to the mid-1990's when students successfully made this proposal as a "senior privilege". Although this is not an uncommon practice in American high schools, the committee struggled to find any educational value to this practice. In fact, the committee believes that our current practice may contribute to early cases of "senioritis" and inattention to school during the spring semester of the senior year.

Using the purpose statement as a guide, the committee determined that if we believe that there is student learning value in the final assessment process, then we should not exempt senior students from participating. Although this will not be a popular decision among students, second-semester seniors in particular are closer than any of our students to taking collegiate final assessments and may benefit the most from participating in the final assessment process. There are multiple logistical methods to facilitate spring semester final assessments for seniors that are easily implemented.

The committee did discuss the practice of exempting students from final assessments if they meet specific attendance, behavior, and academic benchmarks going into the final (i.e. if a senior has missed fewer than 5 days, has not been suspended, and is getting an 'A' at the end of the course they are exempted from the final). The committee believes that such a practice: 1) negates the learning value of preparing for final assessments and 2) is challenging to accurately track in a timely manner.

Recommendation: The committee recommends that all students take final assessments at the conclusion of each semester. Seniors will begin to take spring semester final assessments at the conclusion of the spring 2017 semester.

Question #4: When should final exams be administered at GHS?

Recommendation: The committee recommends that GHS conclude the first semester, including final assessments, prior to winter break beginning with the 2016-2017 school year.

Rationale:

We believe that shifting our first semester end date represents a positive shift for our students for the following reasons:

- Teachers reported that they work to unify the big ideas of the course as the semester end approaches to help students make connections between ideas and concepts. Having a two week break in the midst of this process stifles this goal.
- Stakeholders articulated that holding final assessments prior to winter break would increase the continuity of learning and teaching, as preparation for final assessments would be a more logical progression leading up to the assessments.
- Students, parents, and teachers all reported that it is challenging to maintain learning momentum with our current model of ending the semester two weeks after winter break.
- Teachers indicated that it is likely that fewer days of review would be needed for final assessments held prior to winter break due to students having sustained learning leading up to finals. This would result in a net gain of time spent focused on new material.
- Other high schools who have shifted final assessments to December reported that students demonstrated a higher level of focus and commitment.

- Students reported experiencing some anxiety and stress over winter break due their need to prepare for finals while also traveling, hosting out of town guests, celebrating holidays with their families, and other obligations.
- Shifting final assessments to December may serve as a social-emotional intervention by providing our students with a true mental break. All stakeholder groups indicated their belief that students would be ready to start second semester with more academic focus and motivation after having a true break (similar to what occurs at the college level).
- Currently, we conclude final assessments on a Friday with final semester grades due to the following Tuesday (for a total span of 4 days). Shifting final assessments to December and having final grades due the first Tuesday we return from winter break provides a total span of 18 days. Teachers indicated that this not only provides for more time to grade, but opens up possibilities for new types of final assessments and formative feedback that are not practical within a span of 4 days. Due to their high grading load, we specifically engaged the English Department in this conversation and they were very much in support of making the change.
- For students not yet accepted to college, universities want the 7th semester transcripts of our seniors by January 30th, and many will not consider an applicant until this transcript has been received as part of the application. Currently, it is an extreme challenge to get this accomplished given that grades are not due until the second-to-last week of January. Shifting the semester end date to December will allow us to meet this timeline for all of our students, thereby giving them an advantage in the college admissions process.
- Over time, we believe that this change will reduce the number of pre-planned student absences that occur in the days leading up to winter break. This has been the case in other high schools that have made this change. Students with excused absences will be able to make up their final assessments upon return from break.
- Numerous suburban-Chicago high schools have already moved their final assessments before break for similar reasons, and several more are currently studying this. Schools that have already shifted (that we are aware of) include:

Antioch	Maine Township	Oswego
Barrington	McHenry	Riverside-Brookfield
Batavia	Mundelein	Sandburg
Grayslake	Naperville	Stevenson
Hinsdale	New Trier	Warren
Huntley	Niles	Wauconda
Jacobs	Oak Park-River Forest	Woodstock
Lyons Township		York

- The overwhelming majority of the stakeholder groups and sources that we consulted provided very positive feedback about shifting the end of first semester to before winter break, and it was clear that the pros far outweigh the cons of doing so.

Calendar Implications:

- This change would not impact the overall district calendar or the work of preK-8 schools as we are simply trading our final exam days in January for final exam days in December. Whether we begin the school year on August 15th or August 30th, the committee feels strongly that the timing of final assessments should shift.

- We acknowledge that our semesters will continue to be unbalanced under this model. Given the natural year-to-year fluctuations in the calendar, the relative length of our semesters will fluctuate as well. As most of our courses are year-long, this transition should be smooth. Teachers of one-semester courses already deal with unbalanced semesters due to the overall calendar, institute days, standardized testing, and other variables.
- Teachers acknowledge that they will need to make adjustments in their final assessments and lesson plans to accommodate this shift.
- We will need to adjust our extracurricular calendar to shift athletic, music, and other activities away from the days leading up to final assessments and winter break. In anticipation of this shift, the music department has already shifted some events this year. Other high schools who have moved final assessments to December have reported success in shifting these types of events.

Question #5: What value (as a percent of the final grade) should final exams have at GHS?

- The committee examined our current practice of weighting final assessments as 20% of the semester course grade. Due to their preparation, most GHS students perform on the final assessment at a commensurate level to their performance throughout the semester. As such, their final grades remain largely consistent pre- and post-final. For students on the bubble going into the final (a “high C” or a “low A” for example), the performance on the final assessment will often be the determining factor in the semester grade.
 - The committee focused on the purpose statement about the student learning value of final assessments and agreed that a major purpose of significant weighting of the final exam is to create the conditions that prompt students to engage in review and preparation. Two quotes from faculty members sum up this student learning viewpoint nicely:
 - *“Final exams have the singular power to force students to go back over material, think critically about what they have read, review hard-to-grasp concepts once more and talk about the subject matter with classmates and instructors – all of this enhances student learning.”*
 - *“The purpose of final exams is to give students the opportunity to learn material that was missed the first time and to allow students to see the content/concepts together and not just in small units.”*
 - The committee agreed that we should weight final assessments at the lowest level that would foster and maintain the desired result of student focus on strong preparation. There were advocates for raising the weight, advocates for lowering the weight, and the vast majority that felt that 20% achieves this goal.
 - Through discussion, the committee reached agreement that lowering the weighting of final assessments would also lessen student’s attention to them, thereby lessening their learning value. The committee felt that increasing the weighting of final assessments was not warranted, as most students already devote significant time and energy to preparing for their finals.
- **Recommendation: The committee recommends that we maintain the current 20% weighting of final assessments.**

Question #6: Is our existing final exam schedule appropriate at GHS?

Currently, GHS administers final assessments over three days at the conclusion of each semester with three finals on day one and two finals each on days two and three. The committee evaluated two options:

- Spread finals out over four days, with two finals on each of the first three days and one final on the last day. A final exam schedule spread over four days would reduce the number of students with three challenging finals in one day.
- Maintain our current schedule as it currently exists. Currently, the relative difficulty of each student's final exam schedule is dependent not only on their chosen courses, but also the time of day into which they are randomly scheduled.

As a result of the committee's discussion, the group determined that the addition of another final exam day did not outweigh the resulting loss of instructional time. The group believes that our current final exam schedule is appropriate.

Recommendation: The committee recommends that we maintain our existing three day final assessment schedule at the conclusion of each semester.

Conclusion

As we continue to look for different avenues to help our students become more complex, creative, and adaptive thinkers, the Final Exam Study Committee feels that the changes outlined in this document will be very positive for our students. The GHS Administrative Team concurs with this assessment. We are seeking approval from central office now so that our teachers have the advance time necessary to make this a successful transition. As with any change of this nature, we will seek feedback as we evaluate this shift over the course of the next year.

Please let me know if you have any questions regarding this important topic.