

## Article from Wake County Website:

### Honors vs. Average: What's the Big Difference?

While each state and school community has its own curriculum standards, most honors and average paced courses respectively adhere to similar philosophical practices. For example, Wake County Public Schools, one of the largest school systems in North Carolina, divides its high school courses into "honors" and "academic" (average) tracks. In examining the differences in Wake County Schools' 9<sup>th</sup> grade English course options, for example, parents and students can clearly examine the basic similarities and differences between the honors and academic options.

- ***Honors 9<sup>th</sup> Grade English:*** Students in both honors and academic are required to read specific texts from a county-wide reading list. An honors course, however, will generally read more texts than an academic course, as the honors course is conducted at a much faster pace. In order to work more rapidly through the diverse materials, honors students will undoubtedly be assigned more homework than an academic class. Additionally, if a student in an honors course falls behind or is struggling, the student must typically seek out tutoring assistance during his or her own time (during lunch, before / after school etc.), as the course's overall pace cannot be delayed by one student's struggles.
- ***Academic 9<sup>th</sup> Grade English:*** While academic 9<sup>th</sup> graders will read many of the same texts as the honors class, most of the reading for this track will be conducted in class, as teachers may focus more strongly on successful reading practices and strategies. Students will be working at a slower pace to ensure that all members of the class are understanding the material, and struggling students typically have more opportunities to receive help while they are in the classroom setting. Generally, students in the academic class setting will have less homework than the honors classroom.

In examining basic and generalized differences between this 9<sup>th</sup> grade English example, some students may surmise that the academic pathway sounds much more appealing. With less homework and less rigorous grading standards, students seeking an easy "A" may believe that academic courses are their best option for success; however, choosing courses without careful consideration can lead to frustrating outcomes.

Students who are bright and determined to excel in their studies often express greater boredom in academic class settings. While the academic classes are by no means easy, they are simply not conducted at the speedier, more rigorous pace that some students crave. As a result, parents can help their child decide which track is better by evaluating their child's specific habits, interests, and needs.

### Determining a Honors or Average Pathway

When deciding between honors or average paced courses, parents must first and foremost guide their students by determining each of their subject-area strengths. Many students who are able to excel in an honors math class may not excel in an honors English class, and vice-versa.

Yet before students make any definite decisions, parents and kids should find out if their school offers additional points for honors course work. As many schools now provide students with "weighted" grades, parents and kids are finding greater incentives for experiencing the advanced honors challenges. In a weighted grading system, some schools credit honors and AP students with additional GPA points. For example, a "B" in an honors class would hold the same weight as an "A" when determining a student's overall GPA. On the other hand, an "A" in an average course still counts as an "A" for the student's overall GPA.

To determine which classes are best, parents and students can follow basic decision-making steps together:

1. Make a list of the subject areas in which the student excels vs. the courses in which the student struggles.
2. Evaluate the courses that were deemed difficult. Have the student reflect on why each particular subject area was challenging. Was the struggle due to poor instruction, lack of organization, inability to turn in homework on time, or due to deeper course-content challenges? Once the parent and child have discussed the specific problems in each subject area, use the discussion to make decisions about whether or not the academic setting could help students gain greater support in specific areas.
3. Next, for the areas in which students excel, students may want to consider signing up for an honors section of the course. Prior to signing up, however, students should reflect on key questions:

-Am I willing to sacrifice an A in order to participate in a more challenging class?

-Does my school offer "weighted" grades for honors work?

-Will I be able to handle the honors content and assignments amidst my extra-curricular obligations? (Consider sports, hobbies, part-time jobs, etc)

-Do I prefer faster-paced courses or more steady and supportive environments?

Ultimately, both average and honors courses are designed to meet the unique needs of kids of diverse learning paces and abilities. For greater guidance and information, parents and students can arrange for a meeting with their school's guidance counselor.