

A Day in the Life of

Willow Bend Academy



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How does one describe the daily activity of the classroom at Willow Bend Academy? Read on for the details.

Teachers, students and parents determine the type of diploma the student will pursue. Most students pursue either a General Diploma, College Preparatory Diploma, or an Honors Diploma. (The majority pursue College Preparatory Diploma.)

For the few students who have pronounced learning difficulties and will need postsecondary job training rather than further academic work at a college or university, we sometimes grant a Vocational Diploma.

The type of diploma then becomes the “grand plan” with specific course requirements needed for graduation. The plan is then divided into yearly requirements (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior).

Teachers determine subject assignments for the students according to the plans described above. Under the teacher’s direction, students are encouraged to take responsibility for proposing daily plans. Some students need more assistance with this task than others. Initially, teachers may have to “tell” the student what the daily goals will be in various subjects, but the ultimate objective is for students to become proactive participants in planning their activities. Students submit their goals to their teacher at the beginning of each class day and report their progress at the end of each period. The student and teacher discuss homework assignments as required to complete the necessary daily work.

Teachers prepare a Current Status Report which is updated monthly to provide a quantifiable roadmap for their students in planning their daily work. Students and parents know precisely how many units of study must be completed each week to accomplish their academic goals for the year.

Because of the small student/teacher ratio (8:1) faculty members become intimately acquainted with each of their students and know how to balance verbal instruction with independent work. On a given day, most students will spend **at least** 20 – 25 minutes **in face-to-face dialog** with their teacher. One phrase that teachers DO NOT use in working with students is, “Do you need any help?” Many students have been conditioned in previous schools to pretend that they are self-sufficient in order to not appear “stupid” to their classmates, so their answer will generally be that they are NOT in need of any assistance or explanation. Our approach, rather is to use these statements: “Explain what you’re doing.”; or “Let’s look at that together.” This brings the student into a dialog with the teacher without any embarrassment and allows the teacher to identify and correct any misunderstandings or to praise the student as appropriate. Teachers are specifically directed to pursue interaction with quieter students to help strengthen their weak academic areas and communication skills. On occasion, certain students are allowed to work together to utilize peer-to-peer tutoring

as appropriate. We find this particularly beneficial for our international students, as well as the students who assist them with their assignments.

Mathematics is frequently an area of conceptual struggle for students, and one that is often worsened by “gaps” in previous instruction. While the content and presentation of Willow Bend’s math curricula is excellent, based on current diagnostic testing, teachers interact with students to identify their current capabilities, place them in appropriate curriculum and if necessary, create examples and analogies appropriate to their zone of proximal development. On multiple occasions, select teachers have reported teaching an entire area of mathematics one-on-one without the use of a published text to fill in gaps. Across the board, immediate student-teacher feedback and dynamic adjustment have proven to be an effective approach to student learning at all levels of mathematics, from rudimentary courses to Precalculus and beyond.

Many students encounter difficulties in their writing. By working with students through various stages of thematic development, outlining, organizational refinement, proofing and polishing, students are able to witness dramatic improvements in the quality of their written work. Rather than relying exclusively on the traditional “red pen” method which possibly could enable students to simply correct mistakes without comprehending why the changes are important, our teachers rely on interactive discussions and a team-based approach, literally modeling examples of good writing and collaborating side-by-side with students in the creation of a finished product. Beyond the writing component, other cases in English where significant interaction with students may be required include areas such as sentence diagramming and reading comprehension.

Significant interaction occurs across curricula for written reports, as in the case of historical research, science projects, economic analysis or papers about government. The process students are required to follow to write research papers requires significant direct interaction with faculty. The topic is discussed prior to approval. Notecards, sources and initial outline must be submitted prior to writing the first draft. Multiple revisions facilitate a final product of “publishable” quality. All writing assignments for students on the College Prep and Honors diploma plans require multiple editorial revisions based on teacher input.

One semester of each English class generally includes novel studies. Study guides direct the student to answer numerous discussion questions concerning character development, literary techniques and the author’s intended theme(s). The amount of student/teacher discussion will depend on the student. Since the teachers are VERY WELL acquainted with each of their students, the depth of discussion will vary with each individual student. Each of the novel studies includes a final project involving the writing of a paper. For example one of the choices for *The Merchant of Venice* is to write a character study about Gratiano. In completing this project, the student may present three or four drafts to their teacher which the teacher critiques both for content and correct grammar. Since the paper is produced on computer, edits are easily accomplished. The final product then is something the student can show with pride. As

more novel studies are completed, the students' skill in writing improves so fewer drafts will be required. The study guide evaluation, as well as analysis of essays and/or projects and papers provide opportunities for in-depth discussions between the teacher and student. Students may work in small study groups with a teacher for certain book studies.

BCIS (Business Communication Information Systems) projects also include significant interaction as teachers instruct students to embellish their work products incrementally with the inclusion of additional software features. Communication Application (Speech) projects include coaching and practice sessions, along with iterative content refinement and presentation evaluation. Although these are not considered core courses, they do illustrate the ongoing, in depth involvement our teachers have with their students.

Some of the instructional MATERIAL can be received on-line. For assigned reports in such cases, teachers use an interactive approach (a "class discussion" between the student and teacher) as part of completing the assignment. Foreign language lessons are presented on line via Rosetta Stone Version 3. We have accompanying workbook and supplementary grammar materials for French, German and Spanish. We also have workbook materials for International students' study of English. We have "go to" teachers for each language who help students learn the vocabulary and grammar of the particular foreign language and ensure that pronunciation is correct. In fact, foreign language interaction is essential for the proper completion of assignments, (spanning pronunciation, conjugation, and more.) Tests are paper and pencil tests and teachers and students review each test after it has been graded.

Other instructional MATERIAL is delivered on-line, but designed by our faculty. We purchase some material from a company that offers the local faculty the ability to customize the material and design our own tests. Teachers customize the material to fit the students' capabilities, then work closely with students to ensure their understanding. Teacher designed tests in this case are also received via the laptop and, as is the case with pencil and paper tests, a full critique is conducted with the student after the test has been graded. All material delivered on-line is equal in content, academic rigor and has the same timeframe requirements as our standard college preparatory courses.

For students with learning differences such as dyslexia or those who need to have texts read aloud while they read along silently, we employ Kurzweil 3000 software. All our written text materials have been digitized so each page will be displayed on the computer desktop, highlighted phrase by phrase and read aloud (using headphones). Students also have the written texts and workbooks and receive the teachers' input in the same manner as do other students.

While our teachers are generalists rather than specialists, we have "go to" teachers who are more expert in certain subjects. For example we have teachers who are proficient in math from basic arithmetic to calculus, and others who are well equipped to assist with sciences from the basics to Physics and Human Anatomy, and yet others whose expertise is in reading comprehension, English grammar and writing.

Across the curricula, as teachers observe typical “trouble spots” for most students, appropriate content is developed to proactively address some of these areas. All such “teaching aids” are interactive, and include techniques for such skills as balancing chemical equations, solving vector equations in Physics, relating supply and demand curves to surplus and shortage conditions and so forth.

Additional examples of specific strategies employed by teachers to ensure every student has adequate instructional time with their teacher include:

- Utilizing the NRSI Pro Reading curriculum which requires students to summarize and read back **-to the teacher-** passages to enhance comprehension and fluency.
- Requiring their students to complete daily journal assignments, which are then **discussed one-on-one**. This is particularly useful for our ELL students.
- Conducting **teacher-led study groups** for certain book studies.
- Pulling several students together who are working on the same unit to **directly teach certain math / science concepts**.
- Playing vocabulary games with younger and international students.

At the conclusion of each worktext, textbook unit or study guide assignment, students are **required to review the material with their teacher** prior to the administration of a mastery test. If the student passes the test, a new assignment is given. If not, the assignment is returned to the student for further instruction followed by a second test. In either case, the teacher and the student review the graded tests. Personalized feedback is an important facet of the students’ learning. This sometimes leads to the student presenting a justification for an answer that was marked as incorrect. If the student presents a reasonable argument, he/she may get the point(s) back. If the discussion reveals a misunderstanding on the student’s part of one or more concepts, the teacher engages the student in additional tutoring and practice before moving to a new assignment. This may be true even though the student made a passing grade on the test. Our goal for our students is that they always have “full understanding” before moving on to a new assignment that may require using the concepts just presented. Students are required to complete each unit of study included in the course in which they are enrolled.

Beyond these forms of interaction (and there are many others), we also take time each week to interactively “look in the mirror” at academic progress. Students and teachers evaluate what they have done well and what they can do better to improve their progress in the upcoming week. Students realize they are directly accountable to their teacher regarding their academic progress each week. This ensures that students are aware of where they are with respect to annual goals.

Our teachers regularly encourage their students to implement effective study strategies, and apply their understanding of their particular learning style and multiple forms of intelligence during their time both on and off campus to accelerate their learning. The

focus in our classroom is 100% on **active learning**. This is facilitated by both the amount of **direct involvement our teachers have with their students** in conjunction with the carefully chosen curricular materials used.

Daily direct didactic Assembly presentations by the faculty and administrative staff focus on application of principles learned and character education. Through their individual conversation with faculty and staff, students are constantly encouraged to create post-high school goals, which will be both challenging and realistic.

Willow Bend Academy enrolls a wide range of students, from very successful independent learners to very dependent learners. The beauty of this program is that the customization of the program allows students on both ends of the spectrum to be academically successful. Perhaps the greatest gift we give our students is to encourage and expect them to take responsibility for their own education. They are enabled to do that under the careful supervision and tutelage of our extremely capable faculty and staff. Whereas **the dependent learner may spend more time at his/her teacher's desk** working through difficult areas together, each **teacher will purposely engage his/her independent learners** in discussion related to higher order thinking or application of concepts / principles learned.

In summary, the instructional delivery system at Willow Bend Academy is designed to provide a standards-based, individualized approach to education in a positive, proactive and highly interactive learning environment. **The focus in the classroom is on active learning, facilitated by excellent didactic curricula and direct instruction by our faculty.** In so doing, Willow Bend Academy provides a very effective and efficient educational model for all of our students.