

Character Still Counts  
Creating advocates in high school for your student  
Sophomore Parent Newsletter #3 from New Trier's Post-High School Counseling  
Office

Many of the important lessons we expect children to learn remain unspoken; we assume students know that it is still important to treat everyone with respect and compassion, for example. Next year the post-high school counselors will expect your student to have several teachers from which to choose for a possible college recommendation, and counselor visits to sophomore and junior adviser rooms reinforce this. The goal of this newsletter is to describe that process more explicitly and to bring parents on board with this aspect of the process.

While this may seem premature, some students may also need letters during the sophomore or junior year for leadership positions or for summer programs or employment. We'd like to make sure whenever needed, a letter of recommendation is easy to obtain from a selection of teachers.

College letters of recommendation are not required by every college, but most New Trier students will need one letter from a teacher in one of the five traditional academic subjects: English, math, lab science, social studies or foreign language. Students who plan to major in the arts typically still need one academic recommendation unless they are applying to conservatory programs or art schools. Although these letters generally come from junior year teachers--colleges like to have an evaluation from the most recent full year completed before students apply for admission--the behaviors required for a superb letter of recommendation should be in place sophomore year.

The teacher letter of recommendation puts the student in the context of the classroom. It describes the individual as a learner and citizen of the classroom. Here is a list of behaviors important for each student to develop in high school:

Arriving in class on time and prepared

Paying attention to the lesson at hand

Not distracting others from being able to pay attention and learn

Being courteous and respectful to other students, guests, and teachers

Keeping an open mind about other points of view

Using the time offered in class to work on the lesson at hand  
Not being absent on quiz or test days  
Making up work or tests in a timely manner  
Demonstrating an enthusiastic approach to studies

While it may seem that this is all common sense and does not need to be said, every year some students indicate that they do not have anyone to ask for a recommendation. Every year, too, New Trier teachers tell the post-high school counselors that they will not write for students whose conduct was detrimental to themselves, to others, or to the lesson of the day.

Most of the time students think that recommendations should come from classes in which their achievement is strong, or in which they have an "A" or "B" grade. Sometimes they think that a letter should come from a teacher in a discipline in which the student intends to major in college. In reality, the letter has less to do with a certain grade or subject and much more to do with the individual's citizenship and behaviors, including the enthusiasm with which the student approaches the learning process. In many cases a teacher can write an incredibly supportive letter for a student who has met with the teacher regularly, has shown an astonishing work ethic, and has persevered to master the material, even if that resulted in an average grade.

Parents can help their students by encouraging a positive approach to even the most challenging courses, and by helping students put forth their best behaviors in each and every classroom situation. Consistent, regular attendance sets the stage for good grades; much of the material can be learned during the class period and is reinforced by the evening's homework. While evaluation or grades are important, helping students demonstrate an investment learning the material instead of focusing on the grade sets the stage for productive, lifelong learning.

Students and parents often assume that when it comes to letters of recommendation, more is better. That couldn't be further from the truth! Colleges that require teacher recommendations will specifically ask for one or two; only in very rare cases is a third necessary or advisable. In meeting the requirements for letters, before adding an additional letter, the student should consider how different the letter will be from those already obtained; if no new perspective or information will be offered, don't request it or send it!

Teacher letters of recommendation are confidential; neither the student, parent, nor the post-high school counselor will be privy to its contents. Students should ask teachers with whom they have a sound classroom relationship. The teacher does not need to know, for instance, how the student spends his or her free time in order to write an effective letter. Remember, this letter puts the student in the context of the classroom. The post-high school counselor letter puts the student in the context of the entire New Trier community. New Trier teachers will only agree to write letters when they can be overwhelmingly supportive of a candidate.

Although most of this information about classroom conduct is taken for granted, reinforcing these behaviors from home can only promote opportunities for your student to shine in the classroom and eventually in the college application process.