

Finishing the Sophomore Year: Life Lessons
Sophomore Parent Newsletter from New Trier's Post-High School Counseling Office

Now that your student is finishing the sophomore year, your child is halfway through the New Trier experience. This can be a terrific time for parents to help students stop and consider what they have done well and what they would like to change or improve as they look toward the last half of their high school tenure.

We encourage you to let your student have some summer; rest and relaxation are key to returning in the fall rejuvenated and ready for the demands of the junior year experience. It's perfectly acceptable not to have every spare minute of your student's free time programmed with resume-building activities; in fact, we strongly encourage students to enjoy the luxury of being a kid. Figuring out how to structure free time with friends and in activities is a life skill, and one that should be promoted!

Another life skill to promote is a method of assessing previous experiences to help chart a path for the future. As a result, we have an exercise for you to do with your sophomore sometime this summer. Find a time where you and your student can go to lunch, have a cup of coffee at a new café, or go out for dessert. Plan to spend 45 minutes to an hour together. Plan to listen; ask questions, but be silent as your student formulates and communicates his or her responses. We've found that the less you talk, the more they talk to you, and that active listening allows students to reach their own conclusions without parental input. If your student asks for input, feel free to offer only positive comments or suggestions. During the teenage years, even any perceived criticism can shut down communication.

The goal is to help students routinely assess what they do, how they do it, and how they can engage in a way that is more personally rewarding. Ask questions like:

Sophomore year is over; what did you learn about yourself this year?

Did you gain insight into activities that you found rewarding? Activities you liked?

How did participating in _____ affect the way you see yourself?

How did participating in _____ affect the way you see or interact with other students or with teachers?

Commend your student: I noticed you sat down to get your homework done right after you had a snack after school this year – did that study strategy work for you?

You seemed much happier this year; what was different this year?

I was so proud of the way you handled that situation with your friends and know it was very difficult for you; are you happy with the way things turned out?

What changes did you see in yourself this year?

What happened freshman year that you worked hard to change or control differently during your sophomore year? What do you want to continue to work on for your junior year?

Thank you for your help with your younger brother all year; I appreciated your perspective and your willingness to help. You demonstrated great _____ (maturity, restraint, responsibility, initiative). Do you see these qualities in yourself?

What did you participate in outside of your classes that you really enjoyed? What did you get out of that experience? Can you continue to participate next year, or do you want to try something else?

What extracurricular activities do you wish you hadn't participated in? What would you have changed about that experience to improve it?

If there were aspects of your sophomore year you did not like, were there any ways you might have approached things differently for a different outcome?

What risks did you take this year? (Asking for a date, meeting with teachers for the first time, moving levels in classes, taking a new elective or an unfamiliar academic course, for instance.)

What was personally fulfilling this year?

Did anything surprise you academically this year? How did you handle this? Looking back, are you happy with the way the situation unfolded, or are there things you might have changed?

You need not ask all of these questions. You just need to help your student take some time to reflect upon how the year unfolded, what the positive aspects were, how to increase the chances of having additional positive curricular or extracurricular interactions, and to decrease the prospect of negative situations. It's basically about these concepts:

How was the year?

What would you change to make it better?

How do these situations affect the way you anticipate handling the next year?

What can change – either how can I change or how can my choices change – to make next year even more rewarding and important in my personal, intellectual, and recreational growth?

What is vital in this process is putting your own parental ideas and goals for your student aside. This is not about you, but about helping your child figure out how to evaluate and improve his or her life choices. There are no right or wrong answers here, and we encourage you to resist the urge to direct your student's behavior; your job is to help your student learn to figure things out on his or her own – it will mean so much more that way!

We also find that being present or making yourself available to your teenagers is an important step in having them communicate with you. Even if you dread the idea of watching an episode of "NCIS," join your teenagers for an episode or two. You may be surprised at what you learn by just being there, and how much your kids, no matter how mature they want to be, still need you as a sounding board.

Have a terrific summer!!

Thank you for participating in this series of newsletters for sophomore parents from New Trier's post-high school counseling office. This is the last newsletter for the sophomore year. We plan to continue this series with increasingly specific information as your student enters the junior year. If you do not wish to receive these newsletters, contact Deb Donley at donleyd@newtrier.k12.il.us; otherwise, you will continue to receive these emails next year.