



Notes from Panel Meeting of Bell Options Graduates

- Thursday, 1/24/19, at the Bell School Auditorium
- facilitated by Mr. Klein and Ms. Miller
- about 30 Panelists, all of whom graduated from the Bell Options Program and now attend (or graduated from) a SEHS, a private HS, or Lincoln Park HS.
- about 30-40 people in attendance (mostly parents, some students)

Ms. Miller gave opening remarks:

- as parents and students assess the decision on whether to apply to and attend an Academic Center (AC), Bell wants to be sure that they have all relevant information in making that decision, especially at it relates to the **programming at Bell in 6th-8th grades**.
- **main areas** to consider are:
 - **social** – Bell has begun “**Blended Advisory**” periods for homeroom time
 - like PALMS and CAMPS in lower grades, it is a chance to meet new people and form relationships and build bonds
 - meet once per week, with students from across all 3 programs
 - activities are meant to help getting to know each other, and are organized based on common interests
 - **emotional** – remember that in 6-8th grades, peer group relationships are very important
 - self-esteem and self-confidence are well supported at Bell during these years
 - would likely be harder and take more time if student changed environments
 - **academic** – Bell has added a number of new and continued elements:
 - after-school robotics
 - Science Olympiad
 - Future City
 - Future Problem Solvers (FPS)
 - MATHCOUNTS
 - likely adding after-school coding next year
 - An important fact to remember is that at an AC, grades in 7th and 8th grade are *part of HS transcripts*, and will be considered along with grades from 9th-12th grades for purposes of college admission
 - **leadership** – unique opportunities to lead groups and activities
 - **counseling support** – is specific to needs of that age group

Mr. Klein introduced the **overall format** for the meeting:

- we want this discussion tonight to be *helpful* to attendees
 - panelists were instructed to not give any stock answers
 - rather, tell audience the full unvarnished truth
- after a session of open Q&A, panelists will be available to talk in smaller groups for more specific questions

Mr. Klein outlined his vision and mission of **what constitutes gifted education**:

- yes, there is a component of acceleration, but it is not *just* that
 - but if that's all you're after, then there can be problems with that approach
 - sometimes, students and their parents think they can go faster than they really can
- but the essence of the gifted education at Bell is **enrichment**, made up of:
 - not learning what to think
 - but rather *how* to think, how to embark on that process
 - learning how to explore, to take new things in, and make them more and more *your own*
 - wants students to question *everything*, and *everyone* (including him)
 - take hold of your own education (and your own life), assess and decide where you want to go with it, and make it your own
 - create a *personal* relationship with the work they are doing.
 - tangible goals are certainly important, but the intangible part is more of what he is after

Mr. Klein then asked each panelist to briefly introduce themselves, and to say which school he/she attended, and what year he/she is in at that school. **Tally of High Schools** attended:

- Lane Tech – 8
- Payton – 7
- Northside Prep – 6
- Jones – 5
- Whitney Young – 1
- Lincoln Park – 1
- St. Ignatius – 1
- Francis Parker – 1
- Mr. Klein noted that he invited all of his former students who graduated from Bell in the last several years to come to this panel meeting, so this isn't a hand-picked group
 - it should be self-evident that Bell Options Graduates are indeed accepted into SEHS.
 - so getting accepted into a SEHS after graduating from Bell really shouldn't be a concern for 5th and 6th graders
- Mr. Klein then asked the panelists if they considered AC's, and/or tested to get into AC's
 - some students considered it, some not at all
 - some applied and got in; none went to an AC.
 - at the end of the meeting a follow up question was asked that revealed that 3 students took it and were not accepted. Others took it and were accepted, but declined.
 - about ½ took the AC test, some reported that it was just for practice in test-taking

Mr. Klein then **asked the audience** for their questions to be asked of the panelists.

Parent question: it seems, Mr. Klein, that a lot of the new after-school activities that were mentioned will be **falling on you**. Will that be too much for you?

- actually, two of the things mentioned I am not leading (including Science Olympiad and Robotics). And there is actually more that I want to do, and I am open to considering all possibilities.
- further, in this last year with Science Fair was optional and no student choose to do it.
- main thing for students to remember is that each of these activities *is* a lot of work for the students, so doing multiple ones is sometimes not feasible.

Parent question: how would you say **your preparation for High School** (9-12th grades) compares to those who attended an AC for 7th and 8th, academically, socially, etc. Note: several of the panelists have stayed in touch with friends who attended ACs and were able to relate the AC experience to us via those ongoing friendships

- **socially:**
 - Now in high school - AC kids seem more socially isolated from the other non-AC kids that they share class with
 - maturity for all 7th and 8th graders is probably an issue, especially when they have to share a classroom with 17 and 18-year olds.
- **academically:**
 - Mr. Klein really taught us how to write **lab reports**
 - HS biology teacher asked at beginning of class if anyone had learned this before, and only the Bell grads in the class had.
 - we knew how to work hard and how to be detailed, which made HS Biology a great experience
 - 7th and 8th grade at Bell were probably harder than 9th and 10th grade at Jones
 - Mr. Klein pushed us *very* hard, but in a *great* way
 - I was very well prepared for HS
 - parents: your kids will be prepared!
 - we learned how to be self-directed, which my AP Chem teacher expects
 - also learned how to self-advocate, how to step up, ask, and interact with the teacher when you are confused or need further instruction
 - need to know what to ask of teacher and how to ask, as well as how to have a relationship with teacher
 - which we learned at Bell
 - Mr. Klein *ensures* that this happens
 - in first few weeks, kids from AC's might have been better prepared on some specific matters of academic knowledge, but over the course of the year, I was better able to ask my teachers questions and push them to give me the help I needed
- **leadership:**
 - at Bell, I got to be a leader in 7th and 8th grades outside of the classroom, which definitely is not the case for kids in the AC

Parent question: can you address similar question in terms of **preparedness**, but as it relates to **English, Writing, and History**?

- in **Social Studies**, we were taught how to read texts and then **outline your notes** in a very organized way by Mr. Schoenbeck and Mr. Klein.
 - It was really instilled in us, and it really helped so much (“helped insanely” was a literal quote used once)
 - Mr. Schoenbeck would tell us: “In High School your teachers will expect...”
 - note taking has to be personal, but it also has to be effectively organized.
 - learned how to listen and read, and how to discern what information is valuable
- was able to take AP Human Geo as a freshman, and I felt very well prepared for the content and workload, since I had experience with how to do such work effectively
- I questioned, will I *really* need to use these **notetaking strategies** later?
 - now, I see that I am much more organized and efficient because of them
 - I didn’t waste time at home writing paragraphs or long lists, like I see other kids doing. Instead, my outlined notes are efficient, and HW goes much faster.
- my AP US History teacher even was impressed with how my notes were organized, and asked how I learned it
- in **English**:
 - we worked on many of the same poems with Mr. Klein
- in **Writing**:
 - AC kids did not get into better courses in writing
 - the sentence diagramming we learned at Bell helped

Parent question: how many **Bell 6th graders left** for AC’s in past years?

- Mr. Klein responded:
 - from 2000-2012, about 1 student per year
 - from 2013-2016, about 4 per year
 - in 2017 and 2018, about 10 per year
- Bell has always been opposed to the idea of giving HS credit for classes at Bell (Bell cannot give such credit, and has been opposed to the idea when it has been brought up).

Parent question: how are the Bell students **who left for an AC doing now**?

- doing fine, but I do know that they are often taking classes with Juniors and Seniors
- will generally take all elective classes in Senior year
- best if they have a particularly strong sense of motivation

Parent question: do you think there are **any advantages to going to an AC**, either in academics, extra-curricular, etc.

- one possible advantage is the ability to graduate HS a year early, if that is a desired goal and appropriate
- can get more in-depth foreign language exposure
 - which has been an issue at Bell, especially after the CPS budget cuts
 - but one panelist made the counterpoint, and thought it *was* better to start intensive language learning in HS, since the later classes are designed to dovetail with introductory classes at the HS.

- one panelist opined that AC kids end up taking more SAT prep, and get a bit higher SAT score than others on average
- but: *not* more exposure or better learning in math

Parent question: what about the **stress of having to get very good grades in 7th grade** at Bell?

- yes, it was stressful, but we learned how to *deal* with stress in those years
 - and, it was worth it because I am happy where I am now, and being pushed in those years made me well prepared for HS
- Mr. Klein noted that for kids at an AC, their grades in 7th grade matter just as much if they want to attend another HS for 9th -12th, and they also matter for college transcripts.
- One student felt that , maybe it also depends on what you feel safe doing
 - if you feel the chance of not getting admitted to a SEHS creates big sense of not feeling safe, then I can see wanting to go to an AC
 - but realize that the aspects of forgoing Bell and attending an AC that we already mentioned may itself prevent getting the grades in 7th/8th that you would want and expect,
 - especially if you realize you want to attend a different SEHS for 9th-12th.
 - but, I felt very secure about Bell's track record of graduating students who are able to get admitted to an SEHS, and about my chances of getting in to one.
- from what I saw in some 7th/8th graders in AC, their GPA didn't reflect their intelligence and work, probably because they felt *less* stress at that point, having achieved their goal of getting into a SEHS and let their guards down or their foot off the gas
 - remember too, that there is an upside to stress
 - but we first learned at Bell how to deal with stress, so we could function well in the more competitive environment of HS.
- There also was a point that staying at Bell was advantageous because the kids all knew each other and that support system allowed them to explore learning more, to take more chances with learning, and to put themselves out there more, which resulted in a more enriching and satisfying educational experience

Parent question: can you comment on other **non-academic factors, like diversity of HS students**, etc.

- at first, there was some culture shock. The social groups are segregated.
 - but I think I was more prepared for it than if I had been a 7th grader at a AC.
 - and, that is part of the HS experience.
- of course, Bell is not very diverse compared to High Schools,
 - and for the most part we are with the same 30 kids each year at Bell.
 - but, remember, the Options Program itself is *relatively* diverse, with kids from different neighborhoods, which introduces us to diversity (a point reiterated by Mr. Klein in his observations of kids from other schools during field trips).
- upside of tight-knit 30 kids graduating together is that we have stayed in touch even after going to different High Schools
- and, Bell is a very big elementary school, while many HS students come from much smaller schools
- Payton has helpful meetings before classes to discuss identity, tolerance, respect
- being with the same 30 kids each at Bell, we learned to trust and collaborate with others

- so, in spite of the increased competitiveness of HS, I was still able to put faith in others and build trust with them. They reciprocated.
- I was shocked by the number of kids who didn't participate in class
 - since we learned how to speak up in class in Bell, we get more out of our classes at HS, and the HS teachers tend to like us more.
- getting comfortable in a small group setting is very helpful in being comfortable in a bigger setting of HS

Parent question: do AC students **appear to have more stress**, compared to your experience?

- 7th and 8th grades are stressful for a number of reasons (academically, developmentally)
 - Bell was home, and the sense of family helped a lot with that stress
 - I had people to lean on, and the AC kids that I know did not feel that way
- at Whitney Young, I think that AC kids are more stressed than I was in 7th/8th, and by a wide margin
- at Bell, we had 3 years with the same teachers in 6-8th, and we would sometimes spend 2 or 3 hours at a time with them, and the teachers got to know us, and us them.
 - an AC is part of a HS system, which is more rigid in schedule, max 55 minutes per class
 - with less time to get to know any given teacher in 7-8th
- at Bell, we knew that our teachers and 30 classmates had our backs
 - they want you to succeed and get into a good HS
 - which you don't really have as an AC student
 - you've only got a couple friends in class
 - you don't really know the teacher or his/her personality
- I loved Science Fair, it allowed me to delve deeply into my topic and my presentation

Parent question: did any of you **get into an AC and decline**?

- several panelists said yes
- got in, but I felt I wasn't ready for it.
- got in, but didn't find it appealing enough to miss finishing out full Bell experience
- I just wanted to take the test, had no intention of going

Parent question: how many of you applied and **did not get into an AC**?

- a few said yes

Former Bell Options parent and co-founder of Chicago School GPS (an organization dedicated to guiding parents through the various educational options available in Chicago) **Grace Sawin** mentioned:

- my daughter took the AC test as a 6th grader, got in, and I needed to convince her that she would get all she needs for 7th and 8th grades by staying at Bell, including many unique things
 - completing the arc with your peer group, socially and emotionally, is very important
- educationally, the end goal really is college, not HS
 - are you setting yourself up for the best result *college-wise*?
- if you want to accelerate academics, you should ask, what is all that for?

- what are you running to?
- what is the rush to grow up so fast?
- bear in mind, many highly-selective universities do not accept a lot of AP credit that kids raced to earn in HS.

Former Bell parent **Monica Drane** added:

- growing up is *not* a race, and while everybody knows that, it can be easy to forget while in the middle of it.
- these kids don't need to be in a big hurry during these years
- remember, Bell is a great supportive environment with many unique opportunities, and that is hard to find

Mr. Klein and **Ms. Miller** added a few closing remarks:

- Mr. Klein: we hope we fully described to you the Options program in Bell's middle school years, "warts and all"
- Ms. Miller: feel free to come talk to any of us if you have any questions or comments; we want you to stay at Bell but more importantly, we want everyone to feel that the decision is made with all of the necessary information; feel free to ask the students more specific questions now in the smaller breakout groups