

Updated August 1, 2017



Academic Scholars Program

A rigorous program for high-achieving students at the middle school level

What is the purpose of the Academic Scholars Program?

As part of our mission to educate and empower all students to be college and career ready graduates, eligible students in middle school can participate in the *Academic Scholars Program*, a strengthened, rigorous program for our high-achieving students. Offered in all four academic classes in all three middle school grades (6 – 8), the program provides intellectual and creative challenges to help students become skilled problem solvers and critical thinkers. In addition, it incorporates project-based activities to give hands-on opportunities for students to learn, fostering the development of skills for communication, understanding, and team building, qualities that are essential for life in the 21st century.

What are the basic facts of the program?

- Provided at the middle school level in grades 6 - 8
- Offers courses in all four core disciplines: English, mathematics, science, and social studies
- Eligibility determined by *new criteria beginning with upcoming 6th graders*
- Emphasis on project-based learning and “Science and Technology interpreted through Engineering and the Arts, all based in Mathematical elements” (STEAM)
- Goal of producing students who are problem-solvers and have high critical thinking skills
- Provision for training and sustaining new, experienced, and expert teachers on providing appropriate, challenging instruction (differentiated) for higher achieving students while still challenging all students to reach and exceed potential for *all* students

How will students qualify?

In response to feedback from parents, teachers, students, counselors, and administrators, and with guidance from the TCSS Board of Education, the Academic Scholars Program is reviewed annually by a system team composed of middle school administrators, teachers, and parents; elementary administrators, teachers, and parents; counselors; instructional coaches; central office personnel; and a representative from The University of Alabama. The team’s recommendations for 2017-2018 are as follows:

Methods of Initial Qualification for Academic Scholars Classes

<i>Automatic Qualifier</i>	Students who have been identified as “gifted and talented” through the Special Education Referral Process will automatically qualify for all Academic Scholars classes.
<i>Primary Qualifier</i>	Students who score a National Percentile Rank of 90% or higher on the math and reading sections of the ACT Aspire summative assessment* will qualify for all Academic Scholars classes. Most recent available results will be used for qualifications. (*Once the decision for a new summative assessment is finalized by the ALSDE, this criterion will be changed to reflect that.)
<i>Secondary Qualifier</i>	In the event that a school does not reach 20% capacity of students identified for Academic Scholars through automatic or primary methods, the school may choose to identify additional students using a multiple-methods rubric combining ACT Aspire scores in math and/or reading, year-end grade averages for math and/or reading, and the Traits, Attributes, and Behaviors (TABs) Evaluation.

How will the criteria impact the number of students who might be eligible?

Using these criteria, approximately 20% of the class population will qualify for the Academic Scholars Program, thus creating an authentic cohort of high-ability students, who will be provided rigorous, appropriate, project-based learning and instruction.

Are there any additional course requirements for Academic Scholars?

STEAM curriculum will enable collaboration and real-world application of problem-solving skills. Differentiated by levels of activities, discourse, and assessment, program requirements will also include a final student project and portfolio.

How will students who were in the Academic Scholars program during the 2016-2017 school year continue to qualify?

- 6th Graders: *Students may continue in Academic Scholars’ courses for 7th grade by maintaining an 80% yearly average in each core course (English, math, science, and social studies).*
- 7th Graders: *Students may continue in Academic Scholars’ courses for 8th grade by maintaining a 75% yearly average in each core course (English, math, science, and social studies).*

How will students who are new to the Tuscaloosa County School System in 2017-2018 qualify?

- 6th and 7th graders will qualify based on the Methods of Initial Qualifications Chart.
- 8th graders will qualify under the following criteria:
 - National Percentile Rank (NPR) from previous school year’s ACT Aspire Test
 - 80% or higher in core subjects to qualify (1st, 2nd and 3rd nine weeks of current year)

What about students who do not meet eligibility for the Academic Scholars Program?

All students, whether part of the Academic Scholars Program or not, will be taught following the Alabama College and Career Standards and provided with rigorous, appropriate project-based learning and instruction, with differentiation occurring within each classroom to meet the needs of the variety of middle school learners. STEAM curriculum will enable collaboration and real-world application of problem-solving skills for *all* students.