

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT FENN'S NINTH GRADE

1. What is unique about Fenn's ninth grade year?
2. What are the features of Fenn's ninth grade academic program?
3. What about the eighth grader who says he has "outgrown" Fenn?
4. Should your son apply for ninth or tenth grade?
 - a. *Is it more difficult to get into secondary schools in the tenth grade?*
 - b. *Can he enter public high school in tenth grade?*
 - c. *Is it easier socially to begin a new school in grade nine when all of the other students are new, especially for a shy student?*
5. What do the ninth grade numbers look like?
 - a. *How many eighth graders continue at Fenn?*
 - b. *Who makes up the ninth grade class?*
 - c. *Where do Fenn's non-returning eighth graders go?*
6. What should you do when your son is in eighth grade?
 - a. *How should families proceed during the eighth grade year?*
 - b. *How is a decision about the ninth-grade year best made?*
 - c. *When does Fenn need to know your decision about ninth grade?*
 - d. *What resources are available at Fenn for help with your decision?*

1. What is unique about Fenn's ninth grade year?

The Fenn ninth grade year is based on learning and on enjoying the opportunities that come from being leaders of the school. Some students benefit from an additional year of physical and emotional growth before transitioning to a secondary school. The smaller size of the ninth grade class fosters camaraderie and galvanizes friendships, and the entire school community benefits from the older boys' presence and leadership.

Leadership and *independence* are integral parts of the Fenn ninth grade program. Students occupy preferential seating in Ward Hall, a symbolic representation of their position as leaders in the community. Ninth grade students develop their public speaking skills by preparing and presenting what is called their "senior reflection" in All School Meeting. These boys also serve as committee members and team captains, play lead roles in dramatic and musical productions, take leadership in service learning and philanthropic activities, and serve as social planners and as Big Brothers to Lower School students.

The smaller class fosters the building of new friendships, and when combined with the boys' increased maturity and confidence, provides unique leadership opportunities. The Fenn faculty understands the importance of involvement and leadership and supports ninth graders as they take risks, gain confidence, and become the school's standard setters and role models. Independence is encouraged and ninth grade boys become more responsible and self-directed; for example, they enjoy the privilege of a thirty-minute block of free time following lunch twice a week.

2. What are the features of Fenn's ninth grade academic program?

Since 1975, Fenn has offered a comprehensive ninth grade experience comparable to ninth grade programs at all schools that our graduates attend as tenth graders. Fenn graduates have a strong acceptance record and experience success at the full range of independent secondary schools. Admissions offices have confidence in and strongly consider boys who have experienced our ninth grade. We maintain ongoing communication with alumni, many of whom report having been well prepared for the academic demands of their secondary schools.

Taught by an experienced and dedicated team of teachers, academic courses in the ninth grade allow students to explore disciplines such as foreign language and literature in greater depth while covering new material in mathematics and science and learning about the ever-changing modern world in Global Studies.

Ninth grade courses at Fenn are commensurate with ninth grade courses at secondary schools, so students will receive full high school credit. Once successfully completed, all Fenn ninth grade courses, course levels, and year-end grades are entered on Fenn transcripts and sent shortly after graduation to ensure complete course and extracurricular credit. If there are questions or necessary clarifications, the Counseling Office works closely with the secondary schools and families to address the situation.

3. What about the eighth grader who says he has "outgrown" Fenn?

The eighth grader who has been a two-season team leader, has played lead roles in dramatic productions, and is physically bigger and stronger than all of his classmates may perhaps feel he has exhausted his opportunities at Fenn to grow further in academics, athletics, arts, and other activities and that he would benefit from a new experience. By the eighth grade year a few students may strongly identify with the emotional and social sophistication of the secondary school world, where the center of gravity is established by 17- and 18-year olds. That setting, even if in a junior role as a ninth grader, can be important to some students. *However, more than half of each eighth and ninth grade class has been at*

Fenn since the fourth or fifth grade, including some of the most successful ninth graders.

4. Should your son apply for ninth or tenth grade?

a. Is it more difficult to get into secondary schools in the tenth grade?

Assessing admission involves four issues:

1. The individual applicant's academic and extracurricular strengths
2. The number of openings a school has in each grade
3. The competition, i.e. the number and quality of applicants for each grade
4. An applicant's willingness to consider boarding school
5. An applicant's athletic eligibility

Fenn families have the opportunity to carefully consider and choose which entry point (ninth or tenth grade) is better for their son and if boarding school is an option. For the past several years, a substantial number of ninth graders at Fenn have chosen both the Fenn ninth grade experience and a four-year experience in secondary school. It is important that boys should apply out when their profile is the strongest it can be. The ratio of applicants to open spots at secondary schools is similar for both ninth and tenth grades, but it can vary from year to year and school to school, particularly if a school begins to enroll students in middle school.

Many students who enter independent secondary schools choose to repeat a grade. This has no impact on a student's athletic eligibility in high school unless he or she turns twenty before high school graduation. A new rule instituted by the Independent School League (ISL) in 2015 says that such students are not eligible to play interscholastic sports in their senior year. Repeating a grade in high school does not impact a student's athletic eligibility in college unless he or she hopes to play Division 1 tennis. For more information about the eligibility rules in secondary school and college, please contact the Fenn Secondary School Counseling Office.

b. What about entering public high schools in grade ten?

Over the last five years, between 15-20% of Fenn's ninth graders have entered tenth grade at public high school. For many of them, this has posed neither academic nor social difficulties. Many boys have returned to say that spending their ninth grade year at Fenn was the best decision they have ever made. Rarely would a school community make life difficult for an enthusiastic, motivated new member of the tenth grade class. If the student is willing to get involved, work hard, stay positive, and make an effort to cultivate friendships, the transition can be a smooth one, particularly given the increased level of confidence and maturity a boy has developed as a ninth grader at Fenn. The benefits of entering an independent school's tenth grade apply just as strongly to students planning on public high school after Fenn.

c. Is it easier socially to begin a new school in grade nine when all of the other students are new, especially for a shy student?

Most secondary schools, particularly boarding schools, increase their class size by a considerable number in the tenth grade. Their returning tenth graders like welcoming new faces and most schools make formal efforts to integrate the large number of new tenth graders by hosting an orientation period before the school year begins. Most schools also offer a number of sophomore activities throughout the first months of the school year.

The personal confidence that a ninth grade year at Fenn can provide often makes the difference between taking hold at the new school in tenth grade or perpetuating a low profile, which a more reticent student may do without the boost of having been at the top grade of a school like Fenn. Once acquired, the confidence to play an active role is usually carried to the student's next school. The key to being part of any school is becoming involved, particularly in an area of skill and interest. It is difficult to hide in Fenn's ninth grade, and Fenn works harder than any secondary school on promoting involvement and visibility for its ninth graders as the leaders of the school; in fact, Fenn requires its ninth graders to have leadership experience.

Fenn sends an annual questionnaire to all of its recent graduates, asking them about their social transition and their preparation for secondary school. The responses indicate that social adjustment is difficult only for the student who does not become involved in his new school's life—whether he enters in ninth or tenth grade.

5. What do the ninth grade numbers look like?

a. How many eighth graders continue at Fenn?

Historically, between 30-40% of each Fenn eighth grade becomes the Fenn ninth grade class.

b. Who makes up the ninth grade class?

There is no set profile for a Fenn ninth grader. In wonderful ways over the years each ninth grade class has represented the full academic and extracurricular cross-section of the eighth grade class.

c. Where do Fenn's non-returning eighth graders go?

Eighth graders who transition to secondary school fall largely into three groups, although the percentages reflecting these choices vary from year to year. In the last five years, approximately 50% of the boys moving on after eighth grade entered independent day schools; approximately 35% decided on four years of public high school; and about 15% enrolled in four years of boarding school. Middlesex School, Concord Academy, and Concord-Carlisle High School continue to be schools of greatest interest to our families.

6. What should you do when your son is in eighth grade?

a. How should families proceed during the eighth grade year?

Entrance into the Upper School brings some adjustments for most students. The curriculum, as one might expect, becomes more demanding, and the day, which now includes Upper School sports for all students, is longer. It is important that students start the year strong before beginning to worry about plans for ninth grade. After all, the way they start the year will likely help determine the best course of action.

1. *If the decision to remain at Fenn is a clear one*, most families prefer to concentrate on the Fenn experience and defer formulating future plans until the fall of the ninth grade year. It is a good idea, however, to take the SSAT once in the eighth grade year for the sake of experience and confidence.
2. *If the decision to leave is a clear one*, the family should meet with the Counseling Office in the early fall and contact schools to set up campus visits for October, November, and December. Schools require a formal interview with the student and conversations with the parents, and they offer a full campus tour. Most visits last for approximately two hours. Interviewing does not

mean that one *must* apply. Families can disengage from the process at any point. Fenn urges its families to interview at several schools before deciding where to apply. *If a family is firmly committed to leaving Fenn, it is important to apply to schools representing a range of admissions expectations.*

After school begins, parents should call Lauri Wishner (978-318-3616) to schedule an appointment with the Counseling Office. This affords parents a chance to confer with the office in the fall term about the appropriateness of different schools in view of their son's academic and extracurricular record. Students are urged to complete their applications during the December vacation. Depending on the school, the application deadlines range from January 1 to February 1; their admissions notification date is March 10; replies are due by April 10.

3. If their decision to stay at Fenn for the ninth grade year or change schools is NOT yet clear, some families attend secondary school open houses and set up interviews in the fall despite being undecided. The interview process can put the Fenn ninth grade in context, help clarify the decision about what is best, and help define the kind of school to look for as the next step after Fenn. Parents and students may also plan to attend the Fenn Ninth Grade Information Night in early October. (In 2021-2022, a second Ninth Grade Information Night will take place in the spring of a student's seventh grade year). Some students think in September that they want to leave after eighth grade but change their minds as the year progresses. *Families are advised, however, that they need to make their decisions by early December in order to have time to interview and complete applications, allow teachers time to write recommendations, and to have their son take the SSAT.*

Fenn's experience shows that it is far better for families to visit and apply to schools when they are *seriously* considering them for the following September. Secondary schools understandably do not appreciate "window shopping" visits except at open houses and do not appreciate applications that merely "test the waters." Fenn discourages families from putting themselves through the school-search process unless they are thoughtfully and firmly committed to changing schools. It is also in the student's best interest to be viewed by other schools when he is the most mature and ready to apply. *For a great many boys, later is better.*

b. How is a decision about the ninth-grade year best made?

In our experience, every decision is most successful when it is a family decision. The application process is intense and time-consuming, and it can be challenging for some families. Here are some thoughts about the process that might be helpful:

- *Parents who feel best about the decision will define at the outset the extent of their parental "say" and of their son's role in the decision; they will also establish, as ground rules, what options they will and will not entertain.*
- *Parents should listen to their son's ideas and wishes, but insist that he research adequately, view himself realistically, and be specific about his reasons, opinions, and feelings. In short, the student needs to take some ownership of the process.*
- *Parents should keep the focus on what is best for their son in the ninth grade year (and thus what will probably be best over the next three or four years).*
- *Parents should keep the discussion focused on what is best for their son and protect the process from peer pressure, from classmates, and from "cocktail-party talk" from other parents.*
- *Parents should not leave the decision pending any longer than necessary.*

c. When does Fenn need to know your decision about ninth grade?

So that Fenn can staff and plan for next year in a timely and appropriate way, the re-enrollment deadline for the ninth grade is in the early spring, the same time as re-registration for other grades. *Throughout the process, it is important for families to keep the Admission Office and the Counseling Office informed of their plans.*

Parents are typically notified about the next year's Fenn tuition in February. If knowledge of next year's tuition or financial-aid outlook is integral to their decision to re-enroll in the spring, parents should telephone the Admission Office for further information.

d. What resources are available at Fenn for help with this decision?

The Counseling Office, the Upper School Division Head, and the eighth grade advisors are excellent resources to help families make the decision about the ninth grade year, due to their experience with many students and their families over the years. Advisors know the boys well and can provide guidance based on each student's particular needs beyond the general considerations about making this decision.

Families may call the Counseling Office for informal discussions about the process prior to a formal appointment. For families making the decision to apply to other schools for grade nine, the full support of this office is available, including advice and counsel via phone, email, or personal appointment, and, later on, advocacy for the candidacy of their sons with the various admissions offices.

Additionally, the Counseling Office hosts a variety of events and forums to prepare and inform families about the secondary school admission process. The office webpage, www.fenn.org/secondarycounseling, is also an excellent resource for families.