



Gilded in Gold

Students from neighboring schools reflect on Stevenson's reputation

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When Jessie Jiang '24 tells her classmates at Deerfield High School that she transferred from Stevenson, she is confronted by a flurry of questions. Some ask her if she's rich. Others wonder if the coursework at her new school is too easy for her. Yet others share rumors of students who've switched districts or attempted to manipulate their home addresses, all in an effort to attend the school she has just left.

Named the best open-enrollment public school in Illinois by the U.S. News and World Report for the fourth year in a row, Stevenson High School's prestige seems to precede it. After changing schools, Jiang describes how Stevenson's reputation has caused her transfer to be met with disbelief at her new school.

"For a lot of people, it's like, 'if you're in Stevenson, why would you want to go into another school?'" Jiang said. "Everyone has this idea of Stevenson being a better school."

Jiang is no stranger to Stevenson's reputation as a highly competitive institution. Having lived in the district since she was young, Jiang recalls being intimidated by rumors surrounding the school even prior to attending Stevenson.

"When I first started going to

Stevenson, I was kind of scared," Jiang said. "Everyone told me about how Stevenson is really hard and academically rigorous, and how big the school is."

With a total school enrollment of 4,352 students, Stevenson is the second-largest public school in Illinois. In contrast, Lake Zurich High School, where Isabella Silver '25 is enrolled, is less than half the size with a student population of 1,788. In addition to Stevenson's large student body, Silver describes how her initial impression of Stevenson was marked by its multicultural makeup.

"Stevenson is absolutely massive, and Stevenson kids are very diverse and come from lots of different backgrounds," Silver said. "Lake Zurich is not nearly as diverse as Stevenson."

According to the 2022 Illinois Report Card, Lake Zurich's student body is predominantly white (78.4 percent), while over half (51 percent) of Stevenson student's body consists of students identifying as Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, Pacific Islander, or other.

Aside from Stevenson's demographics, Silver adds that the school's facility and amenities also seem to play a role in Stevenson's public perception. When she drives by Stevenson, Silver describes how the school—which she recognizes

by its retention pond and stainless steel statue—can appear both distinctive and daunting.

"The building [is a big part of Stevenson's reputation]," Silver said. "We all see Stevenson [as] the school with a million dollar gym, plant wall, and off-brand Starbucks."

Silver adds that these amenities can also cause Stevenson students to overlook the luxury of having salad bars, sushi lunches, and multiple study spaces available for use. Rebecca Xiao '24, a student at William Fremd High School, adds that many Stevenson students don't seem to fully appreciate the resources and benefits the school offers.

"Stevenson students take a lot of what they have for granted," Xiao said. "I've heard Stevenson students complain about not getting a good parking lot assignment, but I don't think they realize that they are the only people who would have this problem. Other schools don't have three parking lots."

Xiao adds that her peers often characterize Stevenson students as being financially privileged and academically cutthroat. Nonetheless, this general attitude and competitive spirit may cause victory against Stevenson to seem all the more enticing. Competing with her team against Stevenson in the North Suburban Math League, Xiao describes

how Stevenson's standing as a top contender within the league has fueled a sense of rivalry between the schools.

"We've been lagging behind Stevenson for quite a while, and obviously we don't like that," Xiao said. "We work harder when we know we're competing against Stevenson—we're aiming to beat them this year."

According to Xiao, Stevenson's emphasis on its athletic and academic accolades can motivate other schools to perform at a higher level. Jay Mehta, a graduate of Schaumburg High School, shared similar sentiments when competing against Stevenson students in his high school years. However, as a recently appointed English teacher at Stevenson, Mehta says that he has grown to see students' competitive nature in a different light.

"When I was a student, I wanted to beat Stevenson so badly because we always saw them as being better at debate and other extracurriculars," Mehta said. "From a teacher's perspective, I believe some controlled competition can be healthy, but we should not rely on it. We excel at Stevenson by relying on social constructivism to bring the best out of each student."

Contrary to his attitude as a student, Mehta now believes that the high standards set at Stevenson encourage students to place a greater emphasis on their own learning in a collaborative environment. Similarly, Jiang notes that her experience attending Stevenson has helped her gain a different perspective of the school. To Jiang, despite the national awards, various course offerings, and high standardized test scores, there is more to Stevenson than its prestige.

"People show what they want others to see," Jiang said. "Being in Stevenson, you see a lot more than what is put out."

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Rebecca Xiao '24

According to Jiang, while some students may embrace a rigorous course load with multiple AP classes and extracurricular activities, many others do not. Instead of trying to live up to a certain image, Jiang encourages students to choose classes based on their own interests and abilities.

Mehta agrees, adding that Stevenson's various resources are intended to enhance each student's academic journey.

"We don't want it to be about competition, but rather we want it to be about learning," Mehta said. "I've never seen anywhere else have a tutoring center open before, during, and after school. We're giving students every single opportunity to learn, and we want students to take that opportunity and run with it."

In Mehta's view, the resources and facilities that Stevenson offers contribute towards a learning environment where students can thrive, both socially and academically. Mehta adds that these resources not only encourage learning but motivate students to embrace it as a community.

Likewise, while the competitive nature of the school may have proved intimidating at first, Jiang said that she was able to acclimate to the school environment and find a sense of belonging throughout the time she spent at Stevenson.

"You start to realize that there [is] a reason why Stevenson has its reputation," Jiang said. "But at the same time, it's not as bad as everyone says it is." ■

by the **numbers**

Stevenson High
School ranks...

#201 *in*
national rankings

#6 *in*
state rankings

and has...

4,352
students

5 ***Blue Ribbon
awards***

Sources:
Illinois Report Card
Niche.com
D125.org