

School within a school

Kids start high school on the right foot

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Ninth grade was never like this.

A cluster of 65 Farmington High School freshmen are in what almost is a "school-within-a-school." They attend the same classes together and even take field trips to Mackinac Island, which they are scheduled to do May 15-21.

It's called the Freshman Academy, and the first-year pro-

gram apparently is making strides, although Farmington High School Principal John Barrett said it is too early to determine just how much of an impact it is making on actual classroom performance.

The academy was created, in part, as the answer to research (done locally by independent evaluator Susan Wentz) that high school freshmen have a difficult time making the transfer to ninth grade. The academy also is one of the recommendations of a district transitions

FARMINGTON HIGH SCHOOL

committee, of which Barrett is a member.

Other major transition-easing endeavors so far have included a "moving-up day" and a get-acquainted picnic in late August.

"We don't have all the statistics in," Barrett said this week. "Right now, there is an indication that the academy is making some difference."

According to Barrett, there is a basic reason for such transitional activities. "Middle schools are different than high schools. High schools are a lot more complicated. We find kids are struggling that first year."

Although Barrett did not have data available, it is thought that better grades and a reduced drop-out rate are two major reasons freshmen are being eased into the high school setting.

If student happiness is the gauge to determine whether the Freshman Academy is succeeding, consider positive feedback from ninth graders such as Eric Gau. He said the set-up has helped him with his grades, which "were a lot lower at the beginning of the year, and now I'm getting all As and Bs."

But improved grades have just as much to do with being comfortable in the high school environment and meeting people than hitting the books harder.

Transformations

"When I came into ninth grade it was hard to know anybody except for the kids from last year," Eric said. "And I met a lot of people through this ... We went on field trips and do stuff together that's fun."

Of course, having a good time isn't the main purpose of the academy. The academy, made up of randomly chosen students of all academic levels, is a self-contained transformation unit of sorts, taking insecure, apprehensive eighth graders and yielding confident young adults ready to become top achievers and leaders in the high school setting.

Comprising the academy's instructional staff are teachers Katy Lloyd (civics and economics), Jennifer Goshorn (English), Kelly Boyd (health) and Mary Sheltrown (physical education). The quartet meets weekly to plan future lessons involving the 65 freshmen, and to compare notes on various kids, whether or not they are struggling in one area or another.

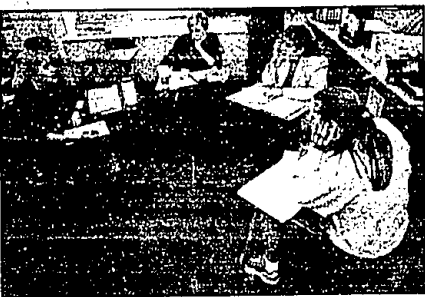
For required classes, students in the academy attend sessions taught by Lloyd, Goshorn, Boyd and Sheltrown. But, noted Barrett, they also attend "outside" classes involving other subjects.

As far as Eric is concerned, the high school chose the right teachers to launch the academy. "Good teachers that understand how hard it (is) to make the transition."

Trip talk

All are enthusiastic about the academy, which Barrett and the teachers said they would like to see expanded in 2000-01.

"Now that we have our feet planted, I'd like to push the



Staff Photo by Bill Drexler
Fresh start: Farmington High School teachers (from left) Katy Lloyd, Jennifer Goshorn, Kelly Boyd and Mary Sheltrown plan upcoming lessons and activities for the Freshman Academy.

envelope," said Lloyd, emphasizing that she would like to see even more participation among those students that both teachers and parents concur might have more difficulty moving over to the high school. "There's a lot more we can do with this."

Expanding the program is one possibility. But, the teachers said, additional planning time designated specifically for the academy would need to be built into their schedules in order to maximize the program's potential.

"We've seen success (among academy members)," Boyd said. "But for what we would ultimately like it to be, we'd definitely need more planning time."

Sheltrown added that it would be a plus for teachers from other academic areas to become involved in an expanded version of the academy.

But students aren't the only ones benefiting from the program.

"I think the academy is a wonderful idea," Goshorn said. "It's a wonderful concept. We have a ways to go, but I certainly think we're better off for having started this. What I learned from this is the value of communication among my peers."

Keeping tabs

Goshorn, for example, might talk to Lloyd about the same student, detailing where progress is or isn't being made. What's happening in one classroom might impact the approach taken in

another.

During a recent weekly planning session, the teachers discussed the need to inform students and parents of what the Mackinac Island trip is all about. It hardly will just be a recreational pursuit.

To that end, there probably will be an informational meeting for students on Tuesday, May 9, during SMART time (Student Managed Academic Resource Time), with a parent session perhaps later that day.

"The purpose (of the trip) is to explore the academic curriculum in an outside setting," Lloyd said. "For physical education and health, they will bike ride around the island."

They'll also study what they eat and what they do to burn off the calories.

For the economic strand of the program, students will investigate local tourism and even interview the owners of island shops. And they'll write their observations down into a journal, for the English component.

When the kids come back, the teachers joked, non-academy members might want to find out where to sign up.

"I think the ones who are not in the academy are jealous," Boyd said. "There's obviously something positive coming out of it because more kids want to be part of it."

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