

Freshmen learn ropes with buddies

BY MARIE CHESTNEY
STAFF WRITER

At Clarenceville High, each freshman gets a "buddy," a senior who has learned the ropes and made it successfully through three years of high school.

Sometime in the next two weeks, the match-up between freshmen and senior mentors will take place. For freshmen, the match-up is mandatory; seniors who are themselves struggling may choose not to participate.

For two years now, the linking of the two classes has taken place because of what Principal David Simowski calls the "critical freshman year."

"The majority make the transition from middle to high school smoothly," Simowski said. "But there is a high correlation between those who drop out at age 16 and those who are not successful as freshmen. It's critical in that first year that a good foundation be set."

"If a strong foundation is set, the house is strong and well-built. If it's weak, the house could fall and crumble. It doesn't get any more critical than that first year. Not that they can't turn things around later, but the tone is set."

"We're seeing the transition from middle to high school becoming more and more difficult. Incoming ninth-graders are taking longer to make it."

On Thursday, this year's freshman class at Clarenceville High heard firsthand from a sophomore who last year skipped a lot of classes and now has to make up the credits she failed to earn as a freshman.

Over the summer, the sophomore came to realize how foolish she had been. And she wants to make sure this year's group of freshmen doesn't make the same mistakes she did.

"She's come back with a new attitude, and is willing to talk to the students," Simowski said. "She made a whole lot of bad decisions last year. She knows they won't all listen to her, but she's willing to try."

Numerous factors — from the freedom of an open campus to a rigid attendance policy to a new core curriculum — hit all freshmen coming in from Clarenceville Middle School. Some adjust well academically and socially to the new rules and new classes; other's don't.

"It's here that the seeds of non-

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success are sown," said Harold Makinen, assistant principal. "Freshmen can't drop out of school. But if they fool around and don't earn credits, they're at risk of not graduating. If they don't pass their classes and get behind, then sophomores are back to being freshmen again."

It sometimes happens that students move along to the point that they are seniors but can't graduate because they don't have enough credits, Simowski said. In fact, he said, in this year's senior class is a senior in his fifth year at high school.

He, too, made bad decisions as a freshman, Simowski said.

A lot of how things are done in high school, Makinen said, is learned by trial and error. The buddy system helps freshmen make fewer errors by getting information from someone who knows how the school works. For example, the senior might give the freshman tips on how to try out for the basketball team.

"I feel the buddy system does make a difference," Simowski said. "There's somebody in their own age group who demonstrates that they care about them in an educational sense and want them to achieve. The freshman sees a person who has made it, who has met the challenge. They think, 'If they can do it, I can too.'"

Same-sex matches are generally made; otherwise, the matches are made randomly. With 90 freshmen and 90 seniors, this year's crop of students match up perfectly. If a senior declines to participate, another senior will wind up with two freshmen to mentor.

"Both have to want to do this to make it work," Makinen said. The buddy system is meant to help cut Clarenceville's drop-out rate, currently about 6 percent each year.

"If just one drops out, that's not good," Simowski said. "Our goal is to keep everyone in school. We don't want to lose anyone. If they drop out, they generally do it as a sophomore, when they're 16, because they have not experienced success. The state says they have to hang in until 16, but what if we haven't hooked them?"

In the weeks ahead, Simowski also will talk to the freshmen in small groups. Topics he'll bring up include organizational skills and goal setting.

C'ville's music students get new class

BY MARIE CHESTNEY
STAFF WRITER

Band students at Clarenceville Middle School no longer will be locked out of taking a class in vocal music.

At the request of music teacher Troy Nelson and principal Carl Wegner, the Clarenceville Board of Education Thursday approved adding a "show choir" to the list of middle school extracurricular activities.

Up until now, band students who also wanted to explore vocal music could not do so because both classes take place during the same hour. Conversely, vocal music students couldn't take band. Students had to choose between the two.

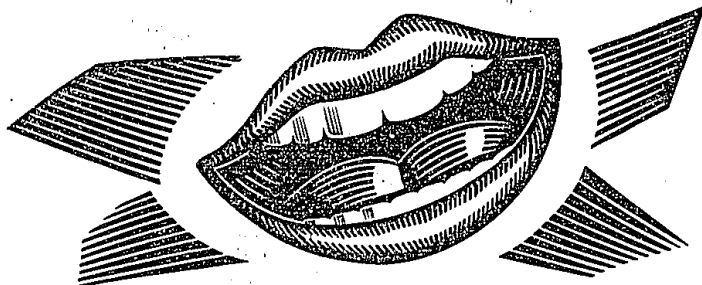
"There's maybe 30 students who can't take choir because they're in the band," Wagner said.

The trustees' approval of the new after-school class hinges on getting approval of the teachers union, the Clarenceville Education Association.

The show choir will meet before school starts, at 7:30 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the middle school choir room. No grade will be given for the extracurricular class.

While all students can audition for the choir, it is specifically designed for band students who can't rehearse and perform with the choir class, Nelson said. Auditions will take place during the first two weeks of September.

In a "show choir," students both sing and move in choreographed rhythm to the beat. The 30-plus-member choir will perform a minimum of two concerts during the year.



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Fieger: Prosecutor wasting money on Kevorkian case

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

The chief defense attorney for the physician known as "Dr. Death" said Oakland taxpayers — and county officials — should be upset with the Oakland prosecutor's office for wasting money by continuing to prosecute Jack Kevorkian under an expired state law.

"He (Prosecutor Richard Thompson) is wasting a lot of money," lawyer Geoffrey N. Fieger said Thursday after a pretrial hearing that ended with Feb. 12 being the date for Kevorkian to stand trial under an expired state statute that made assisting a suicide a felony.

The prosecutors in Livingston, Macomb and Wayne counties aren't prosecuting under the law, Fieger said to a group of news agencies gathered outside the courtroom of Oakland Circuit Judge Jessica R. Cooper.

"But the Oakland County prosecutor sees fit to spend money to prosecute under a law that's expired," said Fieger. "That's like prosecuting a run-runner after prohibition expired."

Fieger was referring to the state law that made assisting with a suicide a felony with a maximum penalty of four years in prison.

The law — aimed at Kevorkian — was passed in 1993 and allowed to expire last November.

"The Legislature thought so little of the law it didn't renew it," Fieger quipped. "Oakland is the only county that wants to prosecute Dr. Kevorkian under that expired law."

Kevorkian was scheduled to stand trial in the 1993 deaths of Marjorie Wentz and Sherry Miller.

'The Legislature thought so little of the law it didn't renew it.'

Geoffrey N. Fieger

bor, and Dr. Ali Khalili of Chicago.

Thursday was the second day in a row that an Oakland Circuit judge said Kevorkian could stand trial for assisted suicide. Judge David F. Breck on Wednesday ruled there was enough evidence to justify Kevorkian standing trial in the 1991 deaths of Marjorie Wentz, 63, and Sherry Miller, 43.

Kevorkian did not appear at either court hearing. But his flamboyant attorney predicted he would win each trial. Prosecuting his client was an abuse of power, he said, and a waste of money.

A spokesman for the prosecutor's office, however, reiterated his contention that Kevorkian should stand trial for assisted suicide, if not murder.

By assisting in the suicides of Frederick and Khalili, said chief assistant prosecutor Lawrence Bunting, Kevorkian violated state law as it existed at the time. "He should be held accountable," Bunting said.

Furthermore, the prosecutor's office will likely appeal that part of Breck's ruling that evidence was not sufficient to warrant Kevorkian going to trial for murder. "We think the evidence will show Kevorkian was an active participant in the deaths of Marjorie Wentz and Sherry Miller.