

Alternative setting opens channels for success

Editor's note:
Today's Lesson is an occasional series which chronicles everyday classroom activities in Farmington Public Schools.



Fired up: Looking at their fired tiles are Erica Hall, Jessica Lewis, teacher Linda Gold and Grandee Stephenson. The Alternative Academy provides a comfortable setting that inspires learning.

Fifteen Farmington Alternative Academy students were busy working in the art studios class one day last week. And there were almost as many projects going on at the same time.

On one side of the room, Jenny Ellison was dabbing paint onto a piece of ceramic tile and Tuquiana Brown labored over a pastel drawing. On the other side, Frank Bankowski used a magnetic photograph as a guide as he sketched a drawing of a mountain lion, while Jason Engel and Elizabeth Miracle worked pieces of clay into sculptures.

And teacher Linda Gold, moving from table to table, made sure to spend time with each student, lending encouragement and offering advice as needed.

That individualized attention is a big reason why the students in Gold's class actually enjoy going to school, working with other students and progressing toward getting their diplomas - something they had no interest in doing at the three traditional high schools in the district.

For students such as Engel, 17, the alternative academy is the comfort zone he needed to turn himself around.

"I went from a C student to an honor-roll student," said 17-year-old Engel, a junior who came from Farmington High School at the beginning of the school year. "You don't have to deal with all of the other kids, you can focus. I do better by myself. I was struggling with my grades before and there's too many people (at FHS). I didn't get along with some people."

According to senior Rick Phillips, 18, who skipped a year at FHS before landing at the academy, the smaller teacher-student ratio tends to relax people and make them feel as if their input and talent matters.

"You're not secluded," Phillips said. "The teachers are more approachable. When I came here, things changed big-time. There's hardly any disputes."

And that's the idea behind the Farmington Alternative Academy, led by coordinator and teacher Dianne Duthie. The school, located on the second floor of the Farmington Training Center, is designed to give "off-the-track" teens a window of opportunity to climb through.

Approximately 55 students attend this year, referred to the academy by their old high school counselors. Many transferred because of pressures of a typical high school setting. Or they had problems with drugs and alcohol, truancy or teenage pregnancy.

At the academy, students are still expected to get their classwork done and be good citizens. They still have to complete subjects such as algebra, economics, forensics and social studies. But, said junior Bankowski, "if you want to go to the bathroom or get a pop, they're not going to yell at you. As long as you do your work."

"They just blossom here," said Gold. "When they come in here they're like little cocoons. Their heads

are down. They don't want to function. But as they warm up and start feeling comfortable ... their self-esteem starts to build."

Collage material

As does their creativity, which Gold tries to stimulate in the art class merely by giving them time and space to create.

At the beginning of class, Gold offers up some direction about what students might want to do in the session. From that point on, they're pretty much on their own.

"I always have a project going on," said Gold, who came to the academy in 1995 after several years in the West Bloomfield School District. "If they don't feel comfortable doing it, they come to me and talk about what they might want to do, and I allow them to."

Sometimes, individuals who wanted to stay to themselves in their former schools eagerly collaborate and produce some interesting art. Both John Frontier and Jeff Wise teamed up on a 3-D collage with magazine pictures depicting elements of their individual personalities and interests glued onto a cardboard model.

"I tried to focus on Generation-X," said Wise, who credits the academy for his new, positive attitude. "I think it's the best choice I ever made. Since I've been here I've been able to express my mind."

Two other students in the class, seniors Eliza-

beth Miracle and Erica Hall, have a lot in common, although the paths they took to the academy were quite different.

Both will probably attend tonight's senior prom at Big Daddy's Parthenon in West Bloomfield. Both will wear the academy's purple and white colors and graduate, 7 p.m. Wednesday, June 3, at Farmington High School. Both plan on going to a community college in the fall. And both speak highly of the academy and how it gave them renewed enthusiasm about education.

Miracle, molding clay into a character called "Harry Harry the Toad" during the class, said she started at the academy only about seven weeks ago, to step up her learning in time to graduate.

"I wasn't going to graduate from Farmington (High) with enough credits," said Miracle, spraying water on the clay to make it softer and more malleable. "I wanted to graduate on time so I decided to come here."

She said it was the correct decision. "The teachers are really nice, more helpful than at regular school. They just care more."

Hall became so fed up with the typical high school routine that she dropped out of Harrison High School for a semester.

"I didn't care, I didn't have a future," said Hall of her state of mind when she dropped out. "Before, teachers didn't have time for everyone. They just threw out what they needed to tell you. Here, there's individualized attention."

She also sees a future. "I'm going to OCC, get my grade-point up, and maybe then go to a university. That would set well with Gold, who seems more of a coach than a teacher. They're just kids who needed a chance."



Hands on: Jason Engel makes a clay model in Linda Gold's art class at the Alternative Academy.



Modest: Harrison's Laura Sparrow credits students and staff for her award.

Harrison teacher sells students on their potential

Laura Sparrow won the Newsweek/WDIV 1998 High School Teacher of the Year in Farmington Public Schools, but those kudos elicit merely a modest reaction from the veteran educator. In fact, she would rather tip her hat to staff and students.

"We have a tremendous staff," said Sparrow. "We have creative teachers. And we have kids who, by and large, are open-minded and who want to take some risks, too."

This year, her students embarked on creating an Egyptian museum "that parallels an exhibit at the DIA (Detroit Institute of Art)," extensive research about cultural heritage and the school's first fine arts fair. Sparrow, an English and humanities teacher who joined

the Harrison faculty in 1971, has company at the top.

Also selected Farmington Public Schools' best teachers of 1998 at their respective levels were Retta London, third-grade teacher at Wooddale Elementary School, and James Ragland, Power Middle School sixth-grade teacher. (Ragland's honor was reported in a previous Farmington Observer story.)

The teachers were honored at a recent awards dinner at the Roostertail in Detroit.

During her speech, Sparrow said the job of teaching today is akin to selling toothpaste.

"In an age where kids are bombarded from every side with media messages telling them of the thousand material things they should want, teachers like us have perhaps 66 minutes a day to tell them about the millions of mental things they can have. Not cars and stereos, sexy teeth and shiny floors, but information and experience, skills

honed for today and tomorrow, wider perspectives on a brave new world and wisdom with the patina of centuries."

In nominating Sparrow, Laura Livingston-McNeils wrote how the teacher has the ability to help students gain self-confidence and turn their lives around.

"When I think of Laura Sparrow, I think of a commitment to personal excellence ... She was a master at assessing people's potential, then coaching them to reach that level. That, to me, is the mark of a great teacher."

Livingstone-McNeils said her brother, David, was one of the students Sparrow successfully motivated.

Wooddale educator creates city of minds

Being picked Newsweek/WDIV 1998 Elementary School Teacher of the Year in Farmington Public Schools has nothing to do with her, according to Retta London.

However, London says it has everything to do with the quality of education in the district and at Wooddale Elementary School, where she teaches third grade and empowers third graders.

The award "means I represent the excellence that exists in our district," London said. "There are many teachers who are deserving of this award every year and I know they can't give it to everybody. I consider myself a representative."

Winning the honor, she added, also reflects on the group of students she teaches and the community they live in.

"I have an incredible class," she said. "I consider myself very fortunate. I think it's the class of the year."

About Wooddale parents, who nominated London, they clearly are "a big part of what we do." The feeling is mutual. Parent Diane Dunn, on the nomination form, wrote that "As the famous 'Rainbow City,' designed as a model for lifelong learning, also has a seal and slogan - 'Live in Your Imagination.'"

Another project this year was the Wilderness Camp, where students go to an outdoor setting and build teamwork and trust.



Model teacher: Wooddale's Retta London empowers students to seek knowledge.

ular boundaries, apparently leaves a lasting imprint.

Also on the nomination form, North Farmington High School student Liz Schnaar said she last attended London's class in 1990. "But I still remember how creative and enthusiastic she made her lessons."

London's students in 1997-98 would probably agree. For starters, the classroom is known as "Rainbow City," complete with mayor and council. "Rainbow City," designed as a model for lifelong learning, also has a seal and slogan - "Live in Your Imagination."

Another project this year was the Wilderness Camp, where students go to an outdoor setting and build teamwork and trust.

"It's a place where they learn self-reliance," London said.

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