

MHS 9th Grade Academy Puts Freshmen on the Fast Track to Success

By Eric Field

The research and data keep showing the same result: The transition from junior high to high school is a key time for 9th graders to find success; those who do not find success, especially in core areas such as English and Algebra, are at a higher risk for not graduating on time or even dropping out.

Muscatine High School (MHS) administration has taken proactive steps to defy these statistics to make sure the maximum number of students succeed. Interventions have varied from the new 50-minute enrichment program, where struggling students are identified and assigned to a teacher who can help them improve grades, to the East Campus alternative school program to help students graduate.

However, Principal Mike McGrory and his administrative team wanted to do more. "Since East Campus is designed for 11th and 12th graders, we've been reactive with waiting for students to fail their first two years before giving them East Campus as an option," stated McGrory. That's when the brainstorming for 9th Grade Academy started.

After one year of talks and observing commonalities in student failures, the 9th Grade Academy is now open under the direction of assistant principal Mike Morgan.

At the time of the interview, 48 incoming freshmen had been identified by their 8th grade teachers at West and Central Middle Schools, as well as by administration and support staff, as candidates who are at least two grade levels behind their peers in core subjects and demonstrate a need to modify school attendance behaviors. However, that number is projected to increase to 60 students this fall.

"What will make the academy most successful will be the people we bring on [to teach in the Academy]," affirmed McGrory. "The hired faculty has experience with at-risk populations, and that will help increase success for the students in the program."

Earlier this year, the district hired three new teachers and transferred one high school teacher to teach in the Academy. The new faculty team started to meet last spring on a weekly basis to plan how the Academy should work. As the planning went ahead, faculty and administration realized there has to be some flexibility in training and programming for the faculty. "As we go along and the program evolves, we'll identify how the faculty and administrators can even better meet the needs of the students in the program," continued McGrory. "We're very fortunate to have a superintendent who is very supportive with the resources we need to make this intervention successful for the students."

Each faculty member in the Academy will be assigned 6-10 students to mentor, and the mentors will give each 9th grader individualized coaching and advocacy on how to get the most out of their MHS education.

The 9th Grade Academy will also have the students focusing on how they can create their own success by tracking their own data on attendance and grades. "A lot of the features we have in place," explained Morgan, "will help as they move forward in high school. There will be a big focus on earning credits [in order to be promoted to 10th grade on time]."

We also want to prepare the freshmen now for what lies ahead after graduation. They need to have a realistic view of post-secondary options. Tentative plans for the 9th graders also include working with Muscatine Community College to show the students what is required for the COMPASS standardized test as well as the upgraded High School Equivalency Diploma requirements. In addition, the Academy teachers may be collaborating on possible volunteer and service learning opportunities. "We'd like the Academy students to realize they can still make an impact in the community," Morgan added.

The location of the Academy was a vital consideration for Morgan and the faculty to create a productive environment. All Academy classes are held on the first floor in a northeastern wing of MHS. The wing is far enough away in its own space that the Academy can operate on a flexible schedule unique from the rest of the high school.

As the 2015-2016 school year starts, Morgan is excited about where the 9th Grade Academy will help more MHS students maximize their potential. "It's also to help [the students] to create dreams and inspire them to... see the bigger picture that they can be and will be contributing members of our community," he concluded. ■

