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SPECIAL REPORT: Successes in our schools

Teamwork, motivation, diversity propel Auburn

Blending traditional students with gifted students has helped the west-side school rise to academic prosperity.

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ROCKFORD — Auburn High School's recipe for academic success goes something like this: Add programs for gifted students to a regular high school. Mix an almost equal amount of minority and majority students. Simmer for about 25 years. Watch ACT scores rise.

The west-side high school's ACT score was the best of Rockford's four public high schools, the 2002 Illinois School Report Card shows. Auburn's 21.2 composite score also beat the state's 19.9 average.

Only Byron High School had a higher composite score, 21.5, in the Rock River Valley. Hononegah High School in Rockton scored the same as Auburn.

Auburn's high composite ACT score also is noteworthy because the school serves one of the largest percentages of low-income students, 46.9 percent, among high schools in the Rock River Valley. Only East High School in Rockford has a higher ratio, 47 percent. Byron's low-income population is 5 percent; Hononegah's is 5.4 percent.

"It's a school-within-a-school approach," said Auburn Principal Kristin Wilson.

That school within a school stands without walls. Barriers that could be created by separating students according to achievement levels don't exist. Instead, competition among all academic levels works.

Wilson said the emphasis on academics and the school's ethnic and economic diversity have made Auburn the second-most chosen high school in Rockford, second only to Guilford.

"Four years ago, we were the least chosen," Wilson said. "We have a waiting list now. People are starting to realize they can get a really good education here."

Gifted programs at Auburn — Academy and Creative and Performing Arts — challenge students academically and creatively. They include about a quarter of Auburn's student body, not enough to carry the entire school's test scores.

That's why administrators believe the gifted programs serve a dual purpose. The programs push higher-performing kids while giving an extra nudge to traditional students, Wilson said.

"Despite the fact that we might have some students that are not as motivated, it has a positive impact on the school," Wilson said. "It permeates throughout the school. The higher expectation trickles down into the regular programs, period."

Experiment for excellence

At the end of 1977, the student population was decreasing at Auburn High School and growing at Rockford's four other high schools. Don Erickson, Auburn's principal at the time, looked to his former colleague, Gary Heidman, for help.

"He called me up and said, 'Hey, I've got a new job for you, so come over here and let's have some fun,'" said Heidman, who was the curriculum coordinator for Kennedy Middle School.

Erickson and Heidman had worked together at Kennedy, Erickson as principal.

Heidman said the belief that the gifted programs were started as a way to get white faces to the west side is untrue. Heidman and Erickson decided to start three alternative programs in 1978 to attract students from across the city to reduce crowding at the other schools.

Heidman organized and named the programs the Academy, CAPA and Performance-Based Program.

Heidman thought it was important to include a performing arts element because when he looked at profiles of academically excellent kids, he "tended to see a lot of arts-based skills and talents also."

All programs required students to take tests to qualify. The Academy provided accelerated classes and curriculum. The CAPA program, which required students to audition, added advanced performing arts classes, and the Performance-Based program blended a team-teaching approach with academically average and unmotivated kids.

Almost 70 students enrolled in the Academy, 50 in CAPA and 60 in the Performance-Based program the first year. The school's population was about 1,300, Heidman said.

The Performance-Based program ended after three years.

"We went through program cuts, and basically it wound up on the chopping block," Heidman said. "It was successful, but it was smaller and had a limited focus of grade nine."

Also that year, the Academy and CAPA programs became gifted programs instead of alternative programs. Changing the name of the programs brought

additional money from the state to support additional classes and staff, Heidman said.

One aspect on which the Academy focused was biology, a subject considered “too tough” for ninth-graders in the Rockford School District at the time, Heidman said.

“In order to be competitive, I introduced honors biology, English and college algebra in a structured curriculum all through the four years, and I was proven right,” Heidman said.

“Other schools in the district had to be competitive with us or they lost their good kids,” Heidman said. “Let’s face it, honest competition in the education arena is going to do nothing but improve education for all kids.”

Taking the test

Much of Heidman and Erickson’s original foundation for the gifted programs continues today. Traditional, Academy and CAPA students still can take classes together.

“It’s good for the kids,” said Heidman, who left Auburn in 1984 and is the acting principal at Jefferson High School. “For gifted kids, you never want to have an entire closed day of classes; they have to be allowed to be regular kids, too.”

That’s another ingredient that contributes to traditional students’ success — opportunity, said Gary Wortham, the gifted advisory specialist at Auburn. As the advisory specialist, Wortham works with the 12 Academy teachers, eight CAPA teachers, parents and students to make sure each gifted child is keeping up with the pack.

CAPA and Academy kids have roundtable lunches in his office weekly to discuss what they think is working and what’s not. Teachers regularly keep Wortham posted on students’ progress.

“It’s a centralized team approach,” Wortham said. “I’m able to synthesize that information and find out what needs to be done for students.

“Those that want to learn should have the opportunity to learn.”

To qualify for the Academy, students are required to test well in all academic disciplines.

However, Auburn has modified the testing procedure to accommodate others who might not test as well. Two years ago, administrators added a survey for parents and an essay portion to the test to allow students to list their community service and personal commitment to the program.

"If you go home and watch your brothers and sisters and make dinner, that's a leadership skill, and that's certainly worth looking at," said Kathy Heisel, the Academy's curriculum implementer. "If a student shows commitment and motivation to learn, they have a chance."

The parental survey helps administrators determine how committed parents are to their children's success. Wortham calls the three components to the test the "triangle of success."

"The most important piece to the puzzle is parental investment," Wortham said. "Kids with parents invested do better hands down than kids that don't."

Kids who don't do well or don't make it in the gifted Academy also are a part of the school's success story, said April Prunty, who teaches honors English to traditional students.

"The gifted programs are only a part of the whole success story," Prunty said. "In my classes, they say, 'Oh that's just because of the gifted kids,' and I say, 'Yes, but look at what we've accomplished here.'"

Somewhat separate, totally equal

Until two years ago, Ruth Harris, a gifted program psychologist for the district, only kept track of the Academy and CAPA test scores as a way to track the success of the gifted programs.

She said Academy ACT scores consistently were higher than traditional students' scores. Harris, who has been with the district for about 30 years, hesitated to put an exact number on the difference in scores. She said she never compared the scores of the traditional students with those of students at other schools.

Two years ago, the state made the ACT scores part of the Prairie State Achievement Test scores to measure the achievement of 11th-grade students with the Illinois Learning Standards for reading, writing, mathematics, science and social science.

Before the change, Academy students had separate codes to put on their ACTs so their scores would be counted separately. After the switch, Academy and traditional students used the same codes on ACT tests because the state wanted one score instead of two for the school.

The last time the scores were separated, the Academy's ACT composite score ranked fifth out of high schools across the nation.

Harris is working with the district to find a way to separate the scores again. She's interested in comparing how much the Academy's ACT scores affect the school's overall score.

"We have met with them and got a positive response," Harris said. "I'm hoping that it would be ready for next school year."

Wortham also is interested in the separate scores.

"I don't know what you'd find if you compared the traditional students here to others at the other high schools, but I'm tempted to suspect they're going to do better than the average," Wortham said. "It'd be interesting to find out."

Janea Fields thinks the answer is obvious.

"You've got kids not doing the greatest and you've got kids doing great, but it's being one school gives the kids that are not doing so well a chance to see kids doing well, which gives them a positive outlook," said Fields, whose daughters, 15-year-old Teasha and 17-year-old Tanara are members of the CAPA program.

A feeling of segregation among the Academy and traditional kids doesn't exist either, said 18-year-old Tyler Meeks, an Academy student.

"The classes you take don't play as big a part socially," Tyler said.

"Kids are just kids at Auburn," said Barbara Meeks, Tyler's mother. "They're all just students."

Each time the bell rings, students pour into the hallways. Some have blue hair; some have blond. A few wear ties; others wear baggy pants.

The variety of colors and creeds serves as camouflage in classrooms such as Heisel's where the blue-haired students sit next to the blonds, and those touting ties smile and nod at those in baggy pants to silently say "What's up?"

"On a social level, it's pretty much open, and there's no separation class-wise," Tyler said.

Gotta Wanna

Big block letters spell out the school's theme "Gotta Wanna" on posters hanging in the hallways and teachers' classrooms. A poster with purple letters hangs in Heisel's English classroom above Academy students who have come to study during a break between classes.

"This is what it's all about — having kids independently working and wanting to excel," Heisel said after she gave students permission to use her classroom.

"These kids are here because they want to rise to the occasion, not because their counselor put them here to fill an hour."