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MVTHS prepares for freshman academy

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MT. VERNON — After two years of research and planning, administrators and faculty members at Mt. Vernon Township High School are working to get all of the pieces in place for the new freshman academy structure for incoming ninth grade students this fall.

"We're at the point now where we're trying to publicize the freshman academy to the community," Principal Ron Daniels said Wednesday.

Scheduling at MVTHS will change to a seven-period day for all grades next year, and ninth graders will also be a part of a newly designed teaching arrange-

ment. Freshmen will be strategically placed in one of four groups of students that they will remain in core classes with for the entire year. Those core classes, English, science, math, and civics or geography will be taught by the same four teachers throughout the year for that specific group of students.

Daniels explained, "We're creating smaller learning communities that will help students be successful in their transition from middle school."

While the idea of a freshman academy has been developed in the educational community for years, he said, the idea seemed like a good fit for MVTHS students at a conference in 2007.

"The concept probably came closer to our ideas two summers ago when a group of teachers attended the Modern Schools Conference in Washington, D.C.," Daniels said. "That was right around when I was hired as well, and we saw the idea was being realized and working well in other schools."

The most important aspect to many educators is the ability of a small pod of 20 to 25 students working with the same four teachers to get a good start to their high school education.

Daniels said, "The key is the group of teachers who use their time to plan collaboratively with each other on lessons that might

have overlapping themes and keep a better track of how their students are doing [as a whole] and not just in their one class."

Outside of the four core classes, students will still take physical education have periods for two electives. Those who need additional help with literacy and math skills will be enrolled in regular support classes instead of electives to keep them from falling behind.

"We want our kids to get off to a good start in high school and not to have to retake classes and worry about making up the credits they need for graduation," Daniels said.

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"Our major long term goals are increasing attendance, the graduation rate, and student achievement."

Lunch will be separated into two different periods with one for freshmen and a second for the higher grades. Freshman will be restricted to eating on campus and will not be allowed to leave.

"I know there are concerns about that," Daniels said. "We're looking to improve attendance, and the data shows that with a closed campus for lunch the likelihood they will leave school at lunch is diminished. We are looking at intramural activities for them to do during the lunch period. The research

shows that schools with a closed campus see a decline in behavior problems in the afternoon."

School officials are looking at ways to expand both the cafeteria space and the food options available to students as a result of the change.

Daniels said MVTHS was trying to coordinate more closely with the district's 13 feeder schools and he welcomed any families of incoming freshman to call with concerns or questions about the freshman academy.

"We've been hearing many positive reactions, and we're trying to help build relationships with our incoming freshmen," Daniels said. "I know there are some concerns, but I think the positives definitely outweigh them. Families are excited that we're trying to do something to help those students."

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