

Schools housed within a school

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By Carmen Cusido

STAFF WRITER

LAWRENCE -- Fiona Humphreys has a doctorate in biochemistry but went into science not knowing what it was about. Had she been given the opportunity to explore subjects more deeply in high school, "most likely, I would have chosen differently," she said.

But now Humphreys' oldest son, Colm, a Lawrence High School sophomore, will get an early taste of what a career in science might be like, thanks to a special program Lawrence is establishing.

"I feel like it can really help you figure out what you want to do," said Colm, who aims to study biology in college.

Lawrence High School will add three "career academies" -- each with a distinct subject range -- within the general curriculum next September: the Academy of Arts and Humanities, the Academy of Business and International Studies, and the Academy of Science and Technology for juniors and seniors.

The academies will be housed within Lawrence High, and will provide students with an academically rigorous college prep program with a career theme. The 1,200-student high school already offers similar programs for freshmen and sophomore students.

"The goal of the academies is to expose all students to potential careers via a variety of "real-world" experiences that a student enrolled in the regular high school curriculum likely would not get," Principal David Roman said.

EARN COLLEGE CREDIT

Students will have an opportunity to earn college credit while in high school, and they also will take online courses and become involved with internships or other types of workplace exposure.

Even if students participate in one of the three career academies, they still must take core courses which include language arts, math, science and physical education. Many of the classes are available in honors or advanced placement format.

A limited number of students have enrolled in the academies so far, said Jill Vaughn, an English teacher leading the Academy of Arts and Humanities, as guidance counselors have just begun discussion the new options with students.

But the concept of career academies isn't new, and the Lawrence school district isn't the only one to offer classes for students interested in certain careers.

In September, Mercer County Technical Schools launched the Health Science Academy, a four-year high school program for students interested in health and medical sciences.

In Trenton, the district's high school students have small learning communities where, for example, students interested in engineering would take a robotics class, said Toby Sanders, a school board member.

OTHER LEARNING COMMUNITIES

There are two small learning communities at Trenton High West, five at Trenton Central High's Chambers Street campus and three at Daylight Twilight, the alternative high school, said Heather Jackson, interim executive director for curriculum, instruction and assessment.

However, the district's federal grant has not been renewed, and these small learning communities will end this school year, Jackson said.

POSITIVE REACTIONS

Lawrence Superintendent Phil Meara said his district has gotten positive reactions from universities and corporations that support schools in various ways.

Students do not need to have a certain grade point average to be a part of the career academies, said Meara.

Fred Egenolf, a spokesman for Bristol-Myers Squibb, said the company has had a decades-long relationship with Lawrence High School.

"As a life sciences company, having access to a highly-skilled work force in sciences and technology is important for us. One of our focuses in terms of outreach and philosophy is to enhance the teaching and learning of science in the community."

The Hopewell Valley Regional School District is beginning to have discussions about career academies.

"It's a cool set-up," Robbinsville Superintendent Steven Mayer said of Lawrence High's career academies.

Robbinsville does not have career academies, but the district did apply to become a "Choice" school through the New Jersey Department of Education, meaning students from other districts could participate in Robbinsville High School's engineering program.

"High school redesign has been a major issue, both in New Jersey and nationally, over the past several years," said Mike Yapple, spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association.

"Many schools have been turning to academies and 'small learning communities' as ways to improve the academic environment. Many of the vo-techs started career academies in areas such as fine and performing arts," Yapple said.

Staff Writer Meir Rinde contributed to this story.