

News

Vo-tech gets 'top grade' from students

by Joe Sovo

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Making the transition from middle school or junior high to high school can be quite a challenge for students. The vocational program at Natrona County High School is making the move easier.

NCHS is making efficient use of the vocational/technical building on the school's campus. After a remodeling project was completed early this winter, more than 200 ninth-grade students are continuing their education there through core subjects and valuable electives.

The "professional learning community" model requires school staff to focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement.

In mid-February, NCHS principal Dean Kelly and assistant principals Ron Estes, Scott Schutte and Chris Bollinger hosted a walk-through of the building, whose \$1.2 million renovation was mostly on the second floor of the Oak Street structure. Ninth-grade students who had been temporarily schooled at Westwood Elementary the first semester resumed their classes at NCHS. Most of the money for the remodeling came from the school board, and other funds from the School Facilities Commission.



Kelly said that three years ago, a committee was formed to determine how to "allow our freshmen to come and learn how to be high school students," to ease them into a high school setting rather than thrust them into the population of sophomores through seniors. Last year, a freshman program was started, with about 100 participants. Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Mark Mathern helped secure a grant to fund the vo-tech program.

The plan was to have the ninth graders in the remodeling building for the first semester of the 2009-10 school year, but a need for asbestos abatement delayed the plan.

"I thank the board of trustees to allow us to have this facility," Kelly told those attending the informal dedication of the revamped building, which is immediately adjacent to the NCHS main building. "It's a different environment for our kids. It's been very positive."

"Making a connection with kids is the key to their success in building relationships," Estes said. "Failure is not an option. They have multiple opportunities to be successful."

Estes explained that there are two teams of students, Black and Orange, with about 100 in each. Many of them are Dean Morgan and CY junior high students. Teachers use innovation, and communication is "the name of the game," Estes said.

There are four classes a day for each team in the vo-tech program. Ninth graders take the core subjects in math,

social studies, science and English. There are some Saturday classes and after-school help for students.

"They're learning to be responsible," Kelly said of the program. "It's designed to teach kids about that next step in life."

Mathern asked about how the program is affecting grades, attendance and discipline, and Estes responded by saying those areas are showing positive signs.

Some of the teachers in the vo-tech program moved over from other positions in the district, and there are some first-year teachers who came on board after the retirement of a few teachers.

Chamberlain, Schmidt in program

Two of the ninth-grade students in the program are Tate Chamberlain and Mickala Schmidt, who both went to school in their kindergarten- through eighth-grade years at Poison Spider School.

"Counselors from NC talked to us about what we could accomplish here," Chamberlain said of the program, "so we can get adjusted to high school. At NC, it's a larger scale (than Poison Spider). There are educational pathways we could take."

In addition to the core subjects, Chamberlain's classes include Exploring Agriculture, and he hitting American Literature hard this semester. He has French I and physical education in the NCHS main building each day. He said students can choose to take "enriched" classes, where "you learn more, faster." Since he's planning on being a veterinarian, Chamberlain will be focusing on math and science in high school.

Schmidt has the core subjects in the vo-tech building, and takes Spanish, art and PE in the main building.

"It's a lot different," Schmidt said of the step into ninth grade at NCHS. "The teachers are really great. They're making it easier."

She believes segregating the ninth graders from the sophomores, juniors and seniors is working out well. "I feel education here is very good. I can get all my classes." Schmidt said that with the enriched classes, it's possible to complete high school education by the end of the junior year, then take college classes when you're a senior.

She has already picked her ninth grade classes when she was an eighth graders at Poison Spider. Along with fellow ninth graders, Schmidt and Chamberlain are on their way to a quality education.