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WIRED WORLD

In an unlikely setting, an Anchorage charter school connects kids with business and technology.

By Denise Jarrett Weeks

ANCHORAGE, Alaska—It’s as if they’re in a parallel universe: those teenagers banding together along the promenades of America’s shopping malls, occupying the same lanes as the grown-ups but in a separate reality. But here on a busy boulevard in Anchorage, Alaska, there is a shopping-mall-turned-charter-school where those dual worlds happily collide.

At Highland Tech High, younger folk and older folk interact all the time, creating a richer reality together, says Principal C.J. Stiegele. She’s seen how easy it is for a teenager to go through an entire day without talking to a single adult, and she’s vowed that, at this school, that will be impossible.

Students and teachers are encouraged to think of this technology-focused school as functioning like a workplace, where collaboration and shared responsibility are expected. Everyone’s a colleague, though students are to look to their higher-ranking teachers for guidance. And guidance is abundant. Class sizes are small, so teachers can spend ample time with individual students. Every teacher and administrator serves as an advisor, working closely with students to help them craft their school careers with care.

A steady stream of adult professionals comes to the school to talk with students about their jobs, and, often as not, they become mentors to aspiring students. Students themselves are regularly out in the working world, side-by-side with adults as they participate in “job shadows” and work on community-based school projects.

A CHANCE TO SHINE

Stiegele founded Highland Tech as a public charter school focusing on academic standards, technology, and character building. The school opened its doors in fall 2003 to 300 students seeking an alternative to large comprehensive high schools and tradition-bound teaching. All the students who arrived that autumn were bright and hopeful, yet most had struggled to show their promise in traditional school settings, says Stiegele. By the end of that inaugural year, Stiegele and her staff had reason to believe that they were doing something right.

Take the sophomores and juniors, for example. Of the 72 students who came to Highland Tech as 10th-graders, 54 percent had failed half their classes at their previous schools. And

CONNECTING WITH FRESHMEN

In this age of high-stakes testing, school leaders are looking for new ways to create supportive learning environments. At CHS a program called IGNITE is one such approach. Incoming juniors and seniors volunteer for training in the summer to become mentors for the new class of freshmen. The idea is to “ignite” good behavior. Having 90 kids connect with freshmen and establish a sense of belonging has been “a tremendous help for the school climate,” Casey says.

Student body president Taylor Neal agrees. “There are always kids who feel they don’t belong. This school has done a great job in dealing with that.”

Another new program focusing on freshmen takes a page from research that shows the value of smaller high schools. Casey calls it a school-within-a-school: Working with middle schools, CHS staff identify incoming freshmen who are at risk of getting lost in the transition to high school. They’re placed in a different learning environment with smaller classes that meet in three-hour blocks. The student-teacher ratio is lower and a counselor is part of the teaching team.

The added cost of the program is covered by the district’s recent \$1 million “remediation” override levy. Some of the levy also is used for students who need extra help for the ISAT.

Never an easy job, running a high school today is more challenging than ever. At CHS Casey cuts through the complexity with one basic rule for administrators, staff, teachers, and students. That rule: Do the right thing.

THE NUMBERS

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| Grades | 9–12 |
| Total students | 1,450 |
| Racial/ethnic make-up (districtwide) | |
| White | 95% |
| African American | <1% |
| Hispanic | 3% |
| Native American | <1% |
| Asian | 1% |
| Free and reduced-price lunch | 21% |
| Staff | |
| Teachers | 71 |
| Counselors | 4 |
| Administrators | 4 |

Photo by Mark Standley



each of the eighteen 11th-graders had failed at least one grade level in the past. Despite this and a few new-school kinks—computers and textbooks didn't arrive until the second term—Stiegele proudly points out that 75 percent or more of the 10th-grade students passed all three sections of the state's high school exit exam in reading, writing, and math (students can take the test as early as the 10th grade). The record was even better for the 11th grade: Everyone passed all three sections.

A STANDARDS-BASED MODEL

The school is the fruit of an idea sown by Stiegele and a group of entrepreneurs, high-tech professionals, teachers, and parents who wanted to try the Quality Schools Model—a standards-based innovation that has been very successful in rural Alaska—in a small, urban high school.

Businesses and community organizations are key stakeholders, right up there with parents, says Associate Principal Mark Standley. In fact, the Quality Schools Model was developed by the Chugach School District in close partnership with some of Alaska's leading corporations in the oil, transportation, and communications industries. It has attracted the support of such business-funded philanthropies as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle and New Tech Foundation in Napa, California, in part for its emphasis on making learning relevant to the world of work and for teaching students social skills expected in the workplace.

In the model, achievement is the constant, and time is the variable, says Standley. "We don't measure the children by how much time they spend with us, but by how much they achieve," he says.

Students advance to the next grade at their own pace when they can demonstrate mastery of a set of standards in content strands, such as reading and literature; numeric literacy; careers and content literacy; communication literacy; and

personal, health, social, and service learning. Through traditional tests, students must show their mastery of at least 80 percent of those standards to achieve proficiency—90 percent to reach an advanced level.

Moreover, students must be able to apply, at a similarly high level, at least 20 percent of those standards in a real-life context. And what could be more "real" than a poetry slam? That's precisely how some students showed their literary chops last spring, performing their own works in a national poetry slam via audio- and videoconferences with students from Alaska villages to the Bronx, New York.

WALKING THE TALK

At Highland Tech, the teacher-student ratio is 1:22, so every teacher knows every student. Advisors help students figure out what their career interests are and how to go about achieving their goals. The school brings in other adults, too: professionals from the business world who speak to students at "business luncheons," invite students to job-shadow them at work, and serve as mentors.

THINGS THAT WORK AT HIGHLAND TECH HIGH

Project-Based Studies

Students learn by actively solving problems, a process that develops their critical thinking skills. Projects incorporate relevant and current issues, as well as the core disciplines. Also, the work students do in one area can fulfill requirements in other areas. For example, a student might use the same research paper to fulfill standards in both social studies and language arts. In this way, students can move through the standards quickly.

Professional Development

Teachers at Highland Tech High receive ample training in the Quality Schools Model through the Reinventing Schools Coalition. Additionally, Rebecca Midles has begun training teachers in the model and helping them with curriculum development, lesson planning, and instructional strategies. Staff members get together during summer break to review the previous year and to see where they can make improvements. "It's just very fulfilling," says Midles. "You have a lot of ownership that way, too." (To learn more about the Quality Schools Model, visit the Web site of the Reinventing Schools Coalition at www.reinventingschools.org)

For more information: www.highlandtech.org

Make no bones about it, the school’s mission is to prepare these young adults to step straight from high school into promising jobs and college careers. So, at 13, 15, or 18, these young people start “walking the talk.” The dress code is “business casual.” Students take part in job shadows and internships, and work collaboratively on community-based projects. Their environment is technology-rich. Students become adept users of the technologies of today’s workplace, using Palm Pilots, laptops, multimedia programs, videoconferencing, and the like in the course of their days.

“Our students not only learn about what we call ‘employability skills’—things like responsibility, showing up for work on time, dressing appropriately, communicating with adults—but they start working on those skills in seventh grade,” says Stiegele, so that by ninth and 10th grade, they’re ready to apply those skills in a business environment. “We’re constantly working on the mindset of employability.”

A METAPHOR THAT WORKS

Highland Tech students are encouraged to think of themselves as employees and their teachers as their employers. But, before you get the wrong idea: “That metaphor is there on one level,” says teacher Rebecca Midles, “but it’s also there in the sense that it’s the boss that you *wish* you could work for.”

The boss here is someone who cares about your emotional intelligence as well as your performance, she says, who has an emotional connection with you and cares about your interests and well-being. “You have to have that for students,” Midles stresses, “so we don’t give that up.”

But the metaphor packs a wallop when Standley, hoping to motivate kids, likens their achieving the standards to getting paid at work. It’s an attention grabber. “If you’re not working on your standards, you’re volunteering,” he tells them.

Melissa is in 11th grade this year. She says, “One of the things that’s really nice about the standards is you really have a big feeling of accomplishment after you’ve completed a standard. That’s just so cool.”

After mastering a good share of the standards, Melissa earned a “responsibility pass” which gave her some perks. She used her pass to go off school grounds to visit the municipal library, one of Anchorage’s architectural landmarks. “It’s kind of like an incentive for passing off the levels,” she says.

REAL-WORLD LEARNING

In her previous school, says Melissa, she wrote paper after paper and took test after test, but didn’t do well no matter how hard she tried. She was shy and withdrawn.

“The one thing that really wasn’t working ... for me was the way that they taught everything,” she says. “I couldn’t learn it very well. ... So, when I got the test it was like, oh my gosh, I couldn’t remember anything. And my parents were getting really worried because I kept failing all these tests, and they couldn’t understand why.

“Well, here, we’re given the opportunity to do things that deal with technology. We do things like put together PowerPoints, and we do movies, and we put together skits and plays. I mean, the opportunities to show that you know something, and that you can do it, are endless.”

Melissa’s voice is full of excitement and confidence. She’s not the same girl she was a year ago, she says. Today, she has plans to be a nurse.

GOING PLACES

“Where you will go” is a sentiment students hear a lot in this school. It’s not enough to tell students they must master a bunch of standards levels, says Midles, you have to tell them why they should and where it will take them in life.

“Explain why you’re teaching that and how it connects to the real world, and then ... how it’s going to be assessed, what’s going to be the project, and where they are going,” says Midles. “There are a lot of students that need to have those things answered before they can relax and learn. ... You’re always relating it back to where it’s going to take them.”

THE NUMBERS

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| Grades | 7–11 |
| Number of students | 244 |
| Racial/ethnic make-up | |
| White | 68% |
| African American | 5% |
| American Indian/Alaska Native | 15% |
| Asian | 2% |
| Free and reduced-price lunch | approx. 50% |
| Staff | |
| Teachers | 15 |
| Administrators | 5 |
| Support staff | 3 |

