



Apply Learning, Drive Student Achievement

By Jay Steele, associate superintendent for high schools, and Starr Herrman, director for smaller learning communities, Metro Nashville Public Schools

You probably remember learning to drive.

Long before you got behind the wheel, you spent hours in the passenger seat watching other drivers. You may have taken a driver's education course, read a book or played a video game. Finally, you got behind the wheel and learned to drive.

For too long, students have graduated from high school without sitting in the driver's seat and applying what they learned. Applied learning and rigorous academics are key concepts behind the Academies of Nashville in Tennessee's Metro Nashville Public School's (MNPS) 12 zoned high schools.

Personalized learning

Academies are smaller, personalized learning communities in which students apply what they learn in math, science, social studies and language arts. Academies use a theme to engage students and bring relevance and rigor to the curriculum. For example, students in an engineering academy learn the core subjects using the principles of engineering, which allows for greater understanding. Academies help students explore colleges and careers while learning critical 21st century skills so they graduate ready and are prepared for college, careers and life.

Freshman academies transition students to high school through a nurturing environment to ensure high school success. Students in upper grades choose an academy based on their interests. These themes include engineering, science, healthcare, international baccalaureate and aviation. Learning within the context of a theme helps students understand the reasoning behind why they need to know certain things. Each academy has its own guidance counselor, a team of teachers and an assistant principal who work with students for three years, which creates a family-like atmosphere to support student learning academically, socially and emotionally.

Academies partner with area businesses, community agencies and post-secondary schools to provide an enriched experience in and out of the classroom. Partners help make learning more relevant, provide positive role models and give extra support to teachers and students. Partners monitor the academies' progress using achievement indicators including ACT scores, attendance, graduation rates and college-going rates.



A new approach

In 2006, Nashville began this reform initiative with eight principals and a vision. These principals knew the traditional approach to education was not meeting the needs of all students. Graduation rates were declining, a few Nashville high schools were labeled as “dropout factories,” achievement was reaching an all-time low and students were not engaged. A large-scale intervention was needed. In 2007, the district received a federal smaller-learning grant to begin the process of redesigning into academies.

In 2009, MNPS implemented 46 academies in 12 high schools serving more than 15,000 students. The design includes freshman academies and at least two upper-grade academies designed to include high-skill, high-wage targeted industries aligned with colleges and universities to support the selected themes. All schools were placed on a common schedule with teachers teamed together with 90-minute daily planning periods.

Currently, more than 130 business, community and post-secondary partners are actively involved. University partners assist in curriculum design and delivery, and teach alongside high school teachers. Business partners provide experiential learning for teams of teachers through teacher externships. Teachers develop project-based curriculum during these externships, learning how to design real-world applications. Projects are relevant with business partners participating in the classroom by providing enrichment activities through speakers, field trips and authentic examples. Nonprofit agencies are embedded in the academies to provide safety nets and interventions for students in need of assistance.

The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce has convened a CEO champions group to advocate, assist and advise the school district on the program’s redesign. More than 100 business partners participate in six industry council partnerships that support and monitor the academy themes and activities. Academy advisory boards are being formed at the school level for each academy. The PENCIL Foundation and Alignment Nashville work hand-in-hand with the chamber and school district to align resources, personnel and funding in support of the Academies of Nashville.

Leader in place

Associate Superintendent Jay Steele, who arrived in 2009, was hired specifically to implement the communities’ vision. Steele’s first endeavor was to convene community and school leaders, business partners, parents, students and teachers to form a common vision for high schools in which “all students will belong to a personalized smaller learning community engaged in interests in which relationships are valued. Instruction will be project-based, applied and integrated ...[our high schools] will be world-class schools that graduate college



and career-ready students ... where all students have the highest level of education and experiences possible.”

The Academies of Nashville are making this ambitious vision a reality and are holding everyone accountable. As progress continues, each high school graduate is expected to have:

- A 10-year plan for college and career.
- A score of 21 or higher on the ACT.
- A work-based or service-learning experience or a research project.
- At least one virtual course completed.
- College credit or a nationally-recognized professional certification.

Nashville will reach these goals with community support. For more information on the Academies of Nashville and to see its five-year strategic plan, visit www.academiesofnashville.com.

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