



[about](#) | [site directory](#) | [en español](#) | [contact](#) | [media educators](#) | [policymakers](#) | [school boards](#) | [the public](#)

LEARN ABOUT: 21st C. Ed | Charter Schools | Homework

ALL ISSUES

Email Address

SUBMIT

GO

[Home](#) > [Success stories: Small town](#) > NJ: Small academies help students make the grade

±

[Share](#) | [Print](#)

Pre-kindergarten

Investing in high-quality pre-kindergarten education yields benefits for kids, school, and communities.

[Read More](#)

NJ: Small academies help students make the grade



In a cooperative learning exercise for the Freshman Seminar, a team of three students learn about factors in choosing a college and about different types of colleges.

Summary: This high school transitioned from a traditional high school to one that houses smaller learning communities called academies that are modeled after the Talent Development High School. Along with three specific career academies the school included a special ninth grade academy. As a result student achievement, attendance, and parental involvement have all increased.

At the end of the 2004–2005 academic year, Bridgeton High School in southern New Jersey closed its doors as a traditional high school serving a largely minority and economically disadvantaged student body. On September 1, 2005, it welcomed back its 1,100 students, teachers, administrators, and parents to a totally new system of education with its rededication as a Talent Development High School (TDHS) with career academies. Through these new smaller learning communities, Bridgeton started on the road to greater student success in attendance, retention, and academic performance.

Planning for the transition

In 2005, when the school district asked Bridgeton High School to be one of four high schools to participate in a statewide Secondary Education Initiative (SEI) to transition high schools to smaller learning communities, Bridgeton was already primed for the change. Staff and administrators had already begun working in 2004–2005 with Johns Hopkins University on the Talent Development High School (TDHS) model. Plans called for the school to divide its tenth through twelfth grade students into three career academies (i.e., Arts and Humanities; Business and Industrial Technology; Mathematics, Science, and Medical), as well as to create a Ninth Grade Success Academy, and E.C.H.O.E.S. (Everyone Creates His/Her Opportunities, Experiences, and Successes), a credit recovery academy for struggling students.

"We'd tried another model, but needed something more comprehensive to address our students' educational, social, and career needs. District and school administrators,

supervisors, and teachers all attended TDHS conferences and High Schools That Work sessions to understand the concept of smaller learning communities and to take the pulse of what was happening in high school education across the nation," says Bridgeton High School Principal Lynn Williams. "We took back what we learned at the conferences to the whole staff who had also had presentations by TDHS and High Schools That Work beforehand, and voted to adopt the TDHS model."

Teachers and staff also participated in a number of planning committees focused on faculty changes, academy themes and curriculum, communications, and special committees for the Ninth Grade Success Academy and E.C.H.O.E.S. "Each committee had benchmarks and timelines and reported regularly on progress so everyone had the broad picture," says Karen Horwitz, the high school's Talent Development Organizational Facilitator. Regular communications from the high school kept parents and the community informed about the changes. State funds were not available for the transition, but the high school and district were able to budget for the John Hopkins consultants. "The district was very supportive and forthcoming with whatever we needed. For example, it readily provided the funding for six additional teachers and for more consultation time with Johns Hopkins" says Horwitz.

Putting the plan into action

Once the planning phase concluded in spring 2005, Bridgeton decided to implement the academies simultaneously rather than phase them in over time. "Under the SEI, we were going to have to move to block scheduling. The TDHS model already included this type of scheduling so we decided to reorganize the school, schedule, and facility at the same time," said Williams. "Although we had planned ahead, and there was a lot of excitement and enthusiasm, sometimes it felt as though we were learning to fly the airplane while we were assembling it," says

District characteristics

Name: Bridgeton High School
State: NJ
Type: Urban
Grades: 9–12
Enrollment: 1,082
Students per teacher: 9

Enrollment characteristics

Economically disadvantaged: 63.8 %
English language learners: 8%
Students with disabilities: n.a.
White: 18.5%
Black: 49.6%
Hispanic: 31%
Asian/Pacific Islander: 0.6%
American Indian/Alaska Native: 0.4%
Other: n.a.
Source: SchoolDataDirect

All in favor

Why it is important to vote in local school board elections...

[Read More](#)

Good measures for good schools

The right questions to ask for a full picture of the quality of your schools.

[Read More](#)

Horwitz. Ninth Grade Success Academy Team Leader and language arts teacher Joni Resides notes, “When we made the change, the most common shared feeling was fear of the unknown. Eventually, that sentiment was replaced by the feeling that we’re all in this together, and everyone pulled together to make it work. For some schools, phasing in the academies might be a better solution, but this all-at-once approach worked for us.”

Major challenges included re-allocating space within a 1950’s traditionally designed high school so that each academy has its own space, and changing curriculum, lesson plans, and schedules all based on 42-minute classroom sessions to the new 84-minute block schedule. Grouping teachers into academies also required different patterns of teacher interaction across, as well as within, disciplines. “The new use of physical space with each academy on its own floor meant that teachers from the same subject area no longer shared a hallway or common space,” says Michael Valella, Ninth Grade Success Academy social science teacher. “It was a little disorienting at first, but it was great to get to know new colleagues as part of an interdisciplinary teaching team.”

Creating a firm foundation for high school success

The Ninth Grade Success Academy has been a particularly gratifying and successful part of the transition. “With only 320 students, the Academy offers a safe, welcoming environment where entering freshmen can learn how to be successful high school students,” says Academy Principal Stephen J. Lynch. “Most eighth graders aren’t prepared for the discipline of high school and don’t know what to expect. They don’t realize that high school requirements for attendance and grades are stricter,” says Resides. “They really need the structure and individual attention that we’re able to give them in the Academy.” An orientation course, a focus on core courses—language arts, social sciences, and mathematics—limited electives, assignment of each student to a team of core teachers, and freshman guidance counselors are key elements in creating a more personalized environment that takes the whole student into account.

Although freshmen also learn about college and careers to help them make a decision about their future career academy placement, “the Academy’s main focus is on giving them the study and social skills necessary so that they can advance to the next grade and be successful throughout high school and beyond,” says Lynch. “Because the Academy is in a separate part of the building with its own entrance, freshmen students don’t have the distraction or pressure of interacting with upperclassmen,” notes Lynch. “This makes a big difference in disciplinary problems and allows freshmen to bond together as a class.”

Charting a future in college or a career

Upper class academies are organized around three career pathways—Arts and Humanities; Business and Industrial Technology; and Mathematics, Science, and Medical. “We selected our career academy themes based upon our strengths, as well as student interests identified through the Holland Inventory,” says Williams. “Prior to the transition, we had a strong arts program and strong pre-nursing program, for example, so we built on them for the Arts and Humanities Academy and the Mathematics, Science, and Medical Academy. When we saw what career clusters were being developed at the nearby community college, where some of our students are dual-enrolled, we knew we were on the mark.”

Each career academy has required core courses and electives plus a choice of two pathways. For example, the Arts and Humanities Academy has a Creative Arts Pathway to help students gain marketable skills in the performing and graphic arts, communications, music, and the media and a Law and Public Service Pathway for those interested in careers in the law, law enforcement, or government service. “Parents sometimes express concern about requiring students to make a potential career orientation early on, but we try to get them to understand that it’s important to get students focused on a goal even if they change their minds later,” says Williams. “We want students to be motivated and interested so there is some flexibility across academies in case they have varied interests such as music and medicine.”

With many built-in safeguards and safety nets available to all students—the E.C.H.O.E.S. credit recovery academy, a teen center, guidance counseling, after school tutoring, an anger management program, intervention assistance for teachers, plus recognition and award assemblies, after school educational, sports, and social activities—Bridgeton High School strives to address the needs of the whole student. Attendance is up, disciplinary referrals are down over all by 27 percent, and more students are completing their studies each year.

Measuring success

Since the Ninth Grade Success Academy’s inception, student attendance has consistently averaged about 93 percent. The dropout rate during freshman year has declined from 14 percent in 2005 to an average of 8 percent over the past three years. The percent of students passing algebra rose from 61 to 87 percent in the first two years of the Academy. Many students now enter the Academy having already taken Algebra I in eighth grade, and 70 percent of the current freshman class is enrolled in geometry. On average, 90 percent of the freshman passed English over the past three years, up from 76 percent prior to the transition to the TDHS model. The percent of students making the honor roll has increased from 14 percent to an average of 24 percent over the past three years. Students who do not have enough credits to advance to tenth grade move to the E.C.H.O.E.S. Academy where most students recover sufficient credit after a single semester to rejoin their tenth grade class.

The transition to the TDHS model has also invigorated parents who now attend school functions in greater numbers. In 2004, only 40 students had parents present at the Back-to-School night event as compared to 296 students this year. Parents of 417 students attended parent teacher conferences last year. Parents are also in the process of forming a parent teacher association.

“We now have a high school that is preparing students for a lifetime of success and that is more welcoming than ever to students, parents, and the community,” says Williams. “Our system isn’t perfect, but we’re all committed to the model and to making it work better every day.” For a high school whose district motto is “The relentless pursuit of achievement,” no one would expect any less.

Lessons learned

- Re-organization creates unexpected opportunities for everyone to excel. The TDHS model provides for distributed leadership that mirrors the overarching high school administration. Each academy has a principal (who is also an assistant principal of the high school), supervisors responsible for curriculum content and academy pathways (who also serve as department heads), and team leaders (teachers with reduced teaching schedules who are responsible for coordinating academy activities and meetings). "If you provide opportunities for leadership, people will rise to the occasion," says Bridgeton High School Principal Lynn Williams.
- Change takes time and is an on-going process requiring flexibility at all levels. "When something doesn't work," Williams advises, "regroup and move ahead. We're still working the bugs out of the system and probably always will be." Ninth Grade Success Academy social studies teacher Michael Valella notes, "As a teacher, for this model to work, you need to be open-minded, be able to accept change, and be willing to adapt to new ideas all the time." Joni Resides, Success Academy Team Leader and language arts teacher, believes that "this model actually asks more of us because the academy and department work stretches us all beyond the classroom. Sometimes, it's uncomfortable for people, but this work allows teachers to see their influence and the important role that they play outside the classroom."
- Block scheduling is a key element that enhances the educational experience for both students and teachers. "With longer class sessions, students are only required to move four times a day instead of eight or nine. Lessons become more intensive and expansive, and teachers often find that there is more opportunity for creativity," says Success Academy Principal Stephen J. Lynch.
- Learning from each other is as important as learning from outside sources. "We learned a lot from the outside consultants, but we have also found that our staff needs opportunities to share their experiences and expertise," notes Williams. Academy meetings where teachers act as facilitators; department meetings across academies for sharing best practices and instructional techniques; and committees on issues such as student achievement, curriculum, and staff climate offer regular opportunities for interaction. Teachers in the same grade level and interdisciplinary teams have common planning times to work on course content and related issues. With each academy having its own space and teachers, impromptu meetings to discuss students, course content, and other issues provide informal occasions to interact and learn from each other.
- Maintaining the integrity of the educational model, including the physical separation of the academies, is an on-going challenge as the student population grows and the state changes its curricular requirements, especially if the facilities do not entirely lend themselves to the complete physical separation of the academies. Lynch notes, "It's especially important to keep freshmen in their secure and supportive transitional community separated from the distractions of the upperclassmen." The ideal maximum number of students in an academy is 350.
- Developing systems for tracking student progress and data is important. "Early on, we didn't have these systems. We're now tracking each class carefully and can immediately get together to address problems and focus more accurately on student needs," say Williams.

Contact

Lynn Williams
Principal, Bridgeton High School
(856) 455-8030

Karen Horwitz
Talent Development Organizational Facilitator
(856) 455- 8030, ext. 2364

This story was written by Susan H. Stafford, Ph.D. Stafford, a freelance writer and anthropologist from Alexandria, Va., is the author of *Community College: Is It Right for You?*, published in June 2006.

Posted: February 13, 2009

©2009 Center for Public Education

Comments:

No comments.

Add your comments:

Add Your Comments

Your comments will not be posted until they have been approved by the moderator.

[Home](#) > [Success stories: Small town](#) > NJ: Small academies help students make the grade

[Back to the Top](#) | [Share](#) |  [Print](#)

The Center for Public Education is an initiative of the [National School Boards Association](#).

[about](#) | [directory](#) | [en español](#) | [contact](#) | [media](#)

1680 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314 | Phone: (703) 838-6722 | Fax: (703) 548-5613

[Terms of use](#) ©2009 Center for Public Education centerforpubliced@nsba.org