

**The Freshman Grade Academy:
A Program to Facilitate the Smooth Transition of Students from
the Junior High Learning Environment to the High School Learning Environment**

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Abstract

From 2004-2006, Arkansas High School in Texarkana, Arkansas, piloted a program aimed at facilitating the transition of freshman students from a junior high setting to a senior high setting. The creation of the program was prompted by the school's data showing that the freshman class had the highest number of disciplinary referrals, absenteeism, and failing grades, while simultaneously having extremely low benchmark test scores. The program, named the Freshman Academy, consisted of three teams with five core team teachers in the areas of English, computer business applications, math and social studies along with an inclusion special education teacher. The teams were given a common planning time to work together to foster student success in both academic and social circles. After two years of piloting the Freshman Academy, the data showed that the number of discipline referrals decreased, absenteeism was down, grades were up and benchmark test scores were up.

In the spring of 2003, the high school administration at Arkansas High School in Texarkana, Arkansas, realized that they were facing a number of on-going challenges, especially with their freshman population. In the three years since the freshman class had been moved from the junior high campus to the high school campus, the freshman class had the highest number of disciplinary referrals, suspensions, expulsions, assignments to the alternative school, failing grades, truancies, tardies, and absences. The freshman class also had extremely low benchmark and end-of-course test scores. The morale of the teachers who taught this group of students was extremely low. Many teachers felt overwhelmed by the demands of this group. They had very little opportunity to collaborate with peers about their concerns about teaching freshman beyond the faculty lounge. Many of them felt they were alone with little support from parents, colleagues or administration, resulting in numerous requests for other teaching assignments in the upper grades. It became painfully obvious to the administration that drastic measures would have to be taken to turn the freshman classes around.

The high school administration, the central office administration, and the school board all realized that something was missing between these students' eighth grade year at the junior high school and their freshman year at the high school. The number of disciplinary referrals, absences, failing grades, and low test scores that these students accumulated at the junior high school did not correlate with the numbers they were generating at the high school. The administration acknowledged that the teachers were all experienced and certified on both campuses, and that since the freshman class problem was one that successive freshman classes had experienced, the solution was in the program and not the people.

Three years earlier, the administration decided to move the freshman class from the junior high to the high school. Many in the community disagreed with the decision, citing specifically the age difference between freshman and upperclassman, but the administration assured the community that incoming freshman would be placed in a separate academy setting designed to meet the unique educational needs of that age group. Three years after the freshman class had been moved to the high school, few steps had been taken to isolate freshman from upperclassmen. Those few steps included trying to ensure that freshman core classes did not include upperclassmen retaking those classes and trying to accommodate a mostly-freshman lunch period. Although these changes were somewhat successful, it was obvious that those changes were not enough to prevent the problems of excessive discipline referrals, absenteeism, poor grades, and poor benchmark test scores the administration was encountering with its freshman classes.

Extensive research was conducted by high school administration members, including a comprehensive analysis of related literature, visits to see programs that other schools had established to combat the same problems faced by Arkansas High School, and open dialogue between administration and teachers to pinpoint the specific problems the school was having with its freshman classes, along with ideas on how to correct those

problems. The plan that emerged was the basis for what came to be called the Freshman Academy.

Once the administration had decided on what steps needed to be taken to combat the academic and social problems being faced by the freshman classes, they took their plan to the school board. The cost for this program would not be cheap. To implement the administration's plan to accommodate the 350 incoming freshman for the 2004-2005 school year, the administration hired five additional teachers for the high school campus. The teachers in the Freshman Academy would no longer teach six classes, but only five, with the extra period being used for collaborative teaming. Also, an additional special education teacher would have to be provided. With the current numbers of special education students, only two teachers were required, but with three core academic teams, each team would have to have its own special education teacher if the planned inclusion model within the academy was to be successful. Other costs included moving the teachers from their old classrooms to new classrooms and providing stipends for the Freshman Academy teachers for their work in June to help set up the Academy's mission, vision, and parameters. Although the monetary cost was considerable, those involved with the Freshman Academy felt it was an important investment in the future freshman classes at Arkansas High School. The school board agreed with the proposal made by the high school administration, and they voted unanimously to allow the administration to create the Freshman Academy.

The first thing the administration did was to consolidate all freshman core classes. Previously, most of the teachers who taught freshman-level classes also taught upper-level classes. The administration decided that they needed three teachers to teach freshman within each of the core subject areas of civics, English, math (either algebra I or geometry), computer business applications, and physical science. Each core teacher would then be assigned to one of three freshman teams. All five teachers on a team would teach the same group of students. The teachers on each team would have not only an individual planning/conference period, but also a collaborative teaming period when all of the teachers would meet and discuss student progress, student attendance, student tardiness, student behavior, and any other concerns that one or more of the team teachers had about a student. The time was also to be used for contacting parents and keeping them apprised of their child's social and academic progress, meeting with parents as a collective group, conducting interventions with students, counseling students, and preparing cross-curriculum lessons to provide relevant and integrated curriculum daily to all freshman.

Incoming freshman were assigned to one of the three core teams of teachers. The team of teachers acted as advocates for the students, asking for parental input and support throughout the entire year. The immediate goals of the Academy were to increase attendance, reduce discipline referrals, and increase test scores and grades. In order to reach these goals, the administration needed to create teams that could work together as well as with the students and parents to make these goals a reality.

The administration announced their intentions and asked for volunteers to teach in the newly created Freshman Academy. The administration plan called for all freshman core classes to be located on a single hall, away from the upper-classmen population. In order to accommodate this part of the plan, a number of teachers had to change classrooms. Also, any teachers who wished to be a part of the new Freshman Academy had to attend three weeks of summer in-service where the nuts and bolts of the program were to be worked out. Many of the teachers who had been teaching freshman classes and upper-level classes opted to remain teaching only upper-level classes, leaving a number of openings in the freshman academy to be filled by teachers from other campuses within the district and by new hires from outside the district.

The administration actively went out into the district to recruit teachers for the Freshman Academy. Each of the 15 core teachers had to apply to be part of the Academy; no teachers were assigned to it. The administration took this step to ensure that all teachers who were part of the Freshman Academy genuinely wanted to be a part of the new program. Once the 15 core teachers had been selected, the next step for the group was to get to know each other and agree on a shared vision and mission for the new program.

The teachers who were chosen to be part of the Freshman Academy each brought his own ideas and perspectives on how he wanted the Freshman Academy to look and function. It did not take them long, however, to agree upon a shared vision for the new Academy. Their shared vision was, "To facilitate the transition of students from junior high to senior high in order to develop citizens of integrity who will become life-long learners." With a shared vision as their guiding light, the teachers continued to hammer out their specific mission within the Freshman Academy.

The teachers decided upon a four-fold mission to accompany their shared vision. The first part of their mission was to create a safe and nurturing learning environment for all students who entered the academy. The second part of their mission was to offer a diverse and challenging curriculum that fosters academic excellence. The third part of their mission was to encourage personal responsibility, high-expectations, ethical behavior, and the development of individual goals. The final part of their mission in the Freshman Academy was to promote positive, respectful, and professional relationships among staff, students, parents and community. With these four parts of the Academy's mission outlined and agreed upon, the teachers in the freshman academy were ready to tackle the production of a daily agenda.

The first decision that everyone immediately agreed to was that each team must have a team leader. The team leader was chosen by consensus, and everyone agreed that the responsibility of the team leader was to keep the team on task throughout the teaming period. An agenda was also produced and adopted by each team so that they were able to document how they had spent their collaborative planning time. The teams documented parent contacts and visits, student visits, disciplinary interventions, academic

interventions, and other issues that were brought to the team by parents, administration, counselors, or the students themselves.

On a weekly basis, student progress was reported to the team by the core teachers. Items specifically discussed were absences, tardiness, suspensions, and grades. Students who received modifications were also closely monitored, and team teachers shared which strategies they found were most successful for special education students and non-special education students alike. The team teachers were able to analyze map scores, benchmark scores, and other data to see where their students needed the most intervention to raise grades and test scores. Additionally, the team teachers were able to meet as a group with parents, administrators, and students. Unlike other teaming situations where parents felt as though they were being “ganged up on,” the teams in the Freshman Academy were always very quick to point out that they were there to help the student be successful at the high school, and that the parent was the most important member of the student’s team. The teachers were there to help the parent and the student in any way possible to ensure the student’s success both academically and socially. It did not take long for the parents and the students to realize that the teaming environment in the Freshman Academy was not an adversarial one, but instead, a caring and nurturing environment where the primary concern was ensuring the success of the students.

The Freshman Academy proved to be so successful that the district decided to implement the teaming concept by way of academic academies in grades K-12. The Freshman Academy was absorbed into the Texarkana Arkansas School District Academy system in the fall of 2006. The high school currently offers the same type of teaming environment in a career and technical setting, an arts setting, an international studies setting, and a math-science setting.

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