Franklin County to develop 'school within a school' concept for 100 8th graders next year

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RIDGECITY — To provide students with an innovative, forward-thinking educational environment, educators have to ask themselves tough questions about what it means to be ready for the so-called real world.

In Franklin County, that began with a screening of the documentary “Most Likely to Succeed.” Sue Rogers, assistant superintendent, said the film prompted a question: “What can we do to develop 21st century learners here?”

District officials believe the New Tech Network — a project-based learning model in which multiple courses, like English and history or science and physical education, are integrated into one class — may be an answer.

Franklin County will be only the second school district in the state to implement the New Tech program — the first being nearby Henry County, which launched it at Magna Vista High School in Ridgeway four years ago — which Brenda Muse said speaks to their efforts to be innovative.

“It shows that Franklin County is on the move,” said Muse, the county’s director of curriculum and instruction.

Next year, 100 eighth grade students in Franklin County will be given the opportunity to enroll in a New Tech program, which will be housed in the Leonard A. Gereau Center for Applied Technology and Career Exploration.

The county school board unanimously voted earlier this month to enter into a five-year contract with New Tech for $380,000, which will bring the program not only to middle school students but also, eventually, to high school students. The thought is that a student who enters the program in eighth grade and likes it would have the option to continue in high school.

Muse said the program will be funded by money already in the district’s budget and won’t require additional funds from the county’s board of supervisors. Next year, the school division will transfer the expense for an elementary reading program to individual schools, freeing up the money for the New Tech program.

Typically, eighth grade students in Franklin County spend one semester at Benjamin Franklin Middle School and the other at the Gereau Center. Students in the New Tech program will be at the Gereau Center all year but will still be able to take elective courses at the middle school. A wing of the center will be sectioned off for the New Tech students, Muse said, which will likely require some renovation, though not an extensive project.

The Gereau Center, named for a forward-thinking former superintendent, was created with the goal of getting students thinking about the future and what courses they will select in high school to prepare them for the workforce. So it seemed “a natural place to begin” with the New Tech program, Rogers said.

Starting the program in middle school also gives students a chance to test it out without the pressure of as many credit-bearing
courses as they will have in high school. Students who enroll in eighth grade can then make an informed decision about whether it’s a good fit and something they’d like to continue in high school, Rogers said. The goal is to have a diverse population of students in the program — it’s not targeted toward gifted students — and the 100 participants will be chosen via a lottery by ZIP code.

The goal of the program is to better prepare students for the workforce and their future careers, Muse said. “We had to examine how are we preparing students for life after high school,” Muse said. “Are we giving them the skills they need to be successful? Are they leaving high school being able to problem solve and think critically and work collaboratively with others and to accept other viewpoints?”

Muse said she and others realized that, in many cases, students weren’t prepared for what they’d encounter after graduation, and got feedback from local companies that confirmed it. Communication, collaboration, the ability to solve problems and a capacity for listening to the viewpoints of others are among the skills the program will help students to develop, Muse said.

**Warrior Tech Academy**

Franklin County started looking into the New Tech program after they’d heard about Henry County’s Warrior Tech Academy, which was launched at Magna Vista High School four years ago. This year, the district brought the program to Bassett High School. Each functions as an academy, or a “school within a school,” said Monica Hatchett, director of communications and organizational learning.

At Magna Vista, the program spans all four years, and at Bassett it has been introduced in ninth and 10th grade. Hatchett said there’s been very little turnover among teachers and students in the academies. “Most people who become part of the academy are very enthusiastic about the program and they find that that is the way they want to continue to learn,” she said.

At both high schools, libraries were relocated and the space refitted for the academies. The academies aren’t like traditional schools, and that extends to their design, too. At Magna Vista, the colors on the walls and floors let students know when they’re approaching Warrior Tech, as they switch from the high school’s traditional blue and red to orange and green. Through the doors to the academy, there is a common area with tables and chairs, similar to that of a student center on a college campus.

The classrooms are large, with students sitting together in groups and laptop chargers snaking across the floor, plugged into the MacBook Air computers given to each student. The walls of the classroom are dry erase boards, covered in writing. Smaller breakout rooms give students a space to work on their projects.

Instructors of the courses are referred to as “facilitators” rather than teachers.

Brynn Burger is one of two facilitators for the “American Made” course, which combines English 11 and U.S. History. The curriculum is wide-ranging: students created an app to address a social issue, a mock trial will accompany their reading of “The Crucible,” and they’ll start another unit with an escape room, Burger said. Although she had always incorporated projects into her regular English classes, Burger is very structured, so when she first heard about Warrior Tech, she wasn’t sure it would be a good fit. But now, she’s sold on the program and even fought to stick with it.

She says the academy gives students more freedom and the ability to pace themselves as they would in a college class. Many of the students’ projects solve real world problems, or connects with the community, which gives them a sense of pride and shows them they can make a difference, Burger said. She cited one project from last year on veterans’ issues as an example: A barbershop in Bassett is still giving free haircuts to veterans as a result of the students' work.

These aren’t typical projects. “It’s not just a poster board,” Burger said.

Marlee Hunt, a junior, said she was interested in Warrior Tech because she hates to sit still, and in the academy, students can get up and move rather than sit and listen to a lecture for the entire class period. They’re given opportunities to customize their learning. “I like being able to find my own education, I guess you could say,” Hunt said.

Mikayla Greenway, a junior, said in her traditional classes, she’d often finish her work early and find herself bored. In Warrior Tech, that doesn’t happen because students can work at their own pace, and always have new challenges ahead of them. Greenway said Warrior Tech has helped her to improve her communication and social skills and taught her how to work with different kinds of
In a traditional classroom, she said, you might be allowed to pick your partner for a project, and make a beeline for your best friend. At Warrior Tech, that’s not an option. Students work in groups often, and are usually switched up. “In here you don’t have that safety blanket,” Greenway said. She also likes that many of the projects the students work on address real-world problems, rather than problems made up by a teacher for the purpose of an exercise.

Gregory Dalton, a junior, said he enjoys the hands-on projects. One of his favorites was about how to make an Olympic Village profitable for a host country after the games have ended, in which the students built physical models.

In traditional classrooms, he said, teachers tell you what the final project is, but in many Warrior Tech classes, it’s up to the students to choose for themselves.

Hunt, Greenway and Dalton all began at Warrior Tech as freshmen and chose to continue in the academy.

**Putting plans in place**

After Franklin County officials made their first visit to Warrior Tech, Muse said, they knew immediately it was something they wanted to offer their students. She and a few other committee members attended a conference in Orlando this summer, where they had the opportunity to speak with other New Tech schools.

In early September, committee members gave a presentation to staff from the middle school and the Gereau Center on what they’d learned and invited them to give feedback. Of the roughly 70 teachers who responded to a survey, 72 percent said they felt the project-based learning model utilized in the New Tech program would meet the needs of eighth grade students. 77 percent said they felt it was realistic to expect 100 students to apply to the program next year, according to a presentation given to the school board.

Muse said some teachers have raised “valid concerns,” such as creating an elite group, how the curriculum will be created and whether there would be continued support after initial training.

The project-based learning model isn’t for all teachers, Muse said, which is why interested teachers will be asked to apply for the program, rather than assigned to it. “We didn’t want to have to force someone or strongly encourage them,” she said. “We want them to be fully committed. Because it’s going to be a lot of work initially on all of the teachers who choose to go to this program.”

Things will have to move quickly to get the program in place for next year. A program director will need to be chosen in time for February training, teachers will need to be selected prior to March and undergo training, and students and their parents need to be informed about the program so they can determine whether it’s a good fit and make the decision to apply.

The committee is still finalizing plans to share information with students and parents, but they plan to do so in many different ways. Class registration typically starts in February, Muse said, so that will happen soon. “We just want to inundate parents with information so they can make a choice,” she said.

Students who would be a good fit for the program are those who enjoy hands-on experiences, are curious about solving problems, like talking and working with others and can handle being accountable to a group, Muse said. “I think that criteria could apply to every student, in one form or the other,” she said. “But it is going to require a different mindset and a different commitment to learning.”

**Possible Response Questions:**

- Franklin County is starting the New Tech program with eighth grade students. Do you agree with this decision?
- Do you think the New Tech program will be a positive addition to the Gereau Center?
- Is this program needed in Franklin County?
- Do you think you would like to participate in a project-based learning program?
- What qualities would a student need to be successful in a program like the one described in the article?
- Compare and contrast New Tech classrooms with a traditional classroom.