

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

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Cleveland High is now four schools in one

Thursday, September 4, 2003

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SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Students wandered the dim, high-ceilinged hallways of Cleveland High School yesterday, searching for room numbers they checked against class-schedule slips clutched in their hands.

Teachers posted in the corridors fielded questions about what period it was and what came up next. Sophomores, juniors and seniors greeted friends returning from the long summer vacation.

It was a typical first day of school -- except with the confusion, organizational struggles and head-scratching multiplied by four.

In a radical departure from tradition and its past, Cleveland High is splitting this year into four schools-within-schools, or "academies," each with its own faculty, student body, curriculum and class schedule.

Theory met reality yesterday in the most complex and extensive application yet in Seattle of the small-schools strategies championed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is underwriting the venture at Cleveland (and 15 other schools in the state) at an annual rate of \$500 per student over five years.

"I like it," senior Tica Lott said as she headed into the auditorium for an assembly of students in the InfoTech Academy.

InfoTech, which emphasizes computer skills and real-world workplace connections, actually started two years ago at Cleveland as sort of a trial-run "academy lite." Sophomores and juniors, including Lott, spent half the day in class with fellow academy members before reuniting with the rest of the school for regular courses.

"The teachers, they help you more with your work," said Lott, 17. "You're just closer to the teachers."



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Meryl Schenker / P-I

Fifteen-year-old Reba Bennett takes up the yarn-toss challenge yesterday during an ice breaker with fellow sophomores at Cleveland High School.

Now InfoTech has been joined by three other academies, each with 200 or fewer students and its own theme: the Arts and Humanities School; Health, Environment and Life Academy; and School for Global Studies. Students will take all their courses, including the 60 percent that make up the common core of academic subjects, exclusively within an academy. Incoming ninth-graders choose an academy and are expected to stick with it for four years -- and graduate prepared for college.

"It's going to create a far more personalized learning environment," Principal Rick Harwood said. "Teachers are going to be able to know their students far better than before, to know who they are and what their learning styles and needs are.

"It also will allow our teachers to have clearer lines of communication with parents."

Perched next to Interstate 5 in South Seattle in an aging, red-brick building, Cleveland is an ethnically diverse school, with black, Asian and Hispanic students accounting for nearly 90 percent of the total enrollment. More than half of all students come from poor families.

With fewer than 800 students in grades 9-12, Cleveland already was one of the smaller comprehensive high schools in Seattle. But it has ranked near the bottom in achievement test scores, graduation rates and other measures of success.

In an effort to turn things around, parents, teachers and administrators have embraced the Gates approach, touted as a way to foster individual attention to students, closer collaboration among faculty and a stronger sense of community.

"I'm just ecstatic," said Carol Peoples-Procter, PTA co-president. "Small schools can really address the needs of all students. If your teachers know you, it's harder for you to slip through the cracks."

Her son, Malcolm, a sophomore, has signed up for the Arts and Humanities School. The academy's lead teacher, Faith Beatty, calls the program "a dream come true."

"We'll have 200 students that are really focused on the arts, music and drama," she said. "It's exciting for me. I'm getting up at 4 o'clock in the morning and figuring out what I need to do.

"It's an unbelievable organizational challenge -- but it's a lot of fun."

Beatty's counterpart in the Health, Environment and Life Academy, Melissa Johnston, said the summerlong struggle to thrash out schedules and assignments and curriculum was "overwhelming." But she said, "It's exciting, because we have control over what we're teaching. We'll be able to really get to know the students and what they need."

Already, Harwood said, the school has attracted more attention from prospective teachers, both inside and outside the Seattle district. Harwood himself transferred from

the assistant principal's position at Nathan Hale High School, which operates a less extensive academy program, to a similar job at Cleveland a year ago because he was intrigued by the potential of the full-bore approach. And although Cleveland still lags behind Hale and other popular high schools as a placement for students under Seattle's school choice system, its allure is growing.

Jesse Ramirez, 15, took a spot in the bleachers yesterday in the Cleveland gym, where the Global Studies faculty introduced students to the program and its emphasis on foreign languages, international relations and world cultures. Ramirez, a sophomore, transferred from Garfield High -- "a real big school" -- after freshman year, attracted by the small-schools initiative.

"You get to know the teachers more," he said. "They spend more time with you."

But the novel program is not without its tradeoffs. The biggest may be its limitation on course options: A student wishing to take two foreign languages and a drama course, for example, may find that can't be done within the confines of the autonomous academy setup. And a teenager's change of heart about what academy is best won't be easy to accommodate: Hargood said one such switch will be allowed each student in four years, but only for good reason.

Some students are resistant to the academy approach, worrying they'll lose touch with friends, Hargood said. And one student, who would not give her name, said yesterday that she had tried the InfoTech Academy and found it wanting: It "messed up" her grade-point average, she said, adding: "They make you do projects for no reason."

Peoples-Procter foresees a few rough spots ahead -- and a steep learning curve. "This is a transition," she said. "It's high-risk."

But, she said, "I'm excited to try this -- because what was in place before wasn't working for a lot of kids."

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