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### Tech programs help a school find its way

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On a Friday afternoon in September, Vera Artison and Danielle Santiago are pumping up their classmates at one of the first pep rallies of the year.

"Me and Vera got a little bet going here," says Santiago, a Cleveland High School senior, swaggering a little and clearly relishing the moment. "Us say the juniors and the sophomores can get a little bit rowdier than the freshmen and the seniors."

The juniors and sophomores oblige, filling the gymnasium with a raucous din.

Egged on, the freshmen and seniors follow with a deafening roar before the cheerleading team bounces to the front of the room, leading classmates through a boisterous cheer.

The teens are rooting for the Eagles in that night's game against the Bellingham Raiders, but there's more to Cleveland's enthusiasm than just team spirit. Long considered one of the Seattle district's less desirable high schools, Cleveland has existed in the shadow of its popular, more successful cousins -- Ballard and Garfield, Hale, Roosevelt and Franklin.

That's starting to change. Most telling is the fact that Cleveland has a waiting list for the second year in a row, something principal Ted Howard said had been unprecedented since he came to the school in 1988. It's all the more surprising, he said, since Cleveland lost a sizable percentage of its students when two nearby housing projects were torn down over the past couple of years.

"Cleveland has never had a wait list," Howard says. "This is not the most popular school. Garfield, Roosevelt are still the schools most people try to get into for the gifted program."

But Cleveland has a draw of its own now -- two, in fact.

Two years ago, Cleveland and 15 other low-income schools in the state received grants through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Intended to help schools transform



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Grant M. Haller / P-I

Cleveland High School students in Peggy J. Soong Yaplee's design/multimedia class in Cleveland High School's Infotech Academy.

themselves into smaller, more personalized learning environments, the grants include college scholarships of \$25,000 each and emphasize mentoring and post-secondary academic support. The scholarship odds are fairly good -- last year, 38 of the 96 students who applied got them.

Cleveland's other carrot is an Infotech Academy started last year. An example of the small schools philosophy espoused by the Gates Foundation, the academy offers multimedia and Web design classes and uses technology as a learning tool across subjects. Students are encouraged to use computers to communicate with teachers and classmates, conduct research and design class presentations.

The sophomores and juniors in the academy, which will incorporate seniors next year, take tech classes together and join the rest of the school for other subjects.

Academy participation is open to anyone, regardless of grade point average, but with a caveat -- students must sign a contract agreeing that they will be held to higher behavioral and attendance standards than the rest of the school. Of the 200 slots available for the program, 109 are currently filled. They also participate in an overnight camp intended to foster team-building.

Robin Jones, lead teacher for the academy, said the camp is an important exercise in socialization.

"A lot of the kids here have barriers around them. They're used to living on their own, surviving on their own," she said. "They're not used to trusting people."

The Gates Foundation's largess is funding Cleveland's scholarships, but the Infotech Academy is a confluence of timing and community support.

Bill Ellis, a Seattle man who made a career as a high-tech entrepreneur, was getting ready to retire and looking for a way to give back to the community. His friend Bob Watt, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce, suggested Ellis put his expertise to work at Cleveland. **(Editor's Note: This story has been changed to correct Ellis' first name.)**

Around the same time, Cleveland was thinking of starting an academy, a school within the school that would provide a specialized, smaller learning environment.

So Ellis became the chairman of a steering committee with members from companies, including Microsoft Corp. and The Boeing Co., that helped Cleveland raise about \$500,000 in cash and \$100,000 in donated computers and software.

Initially, Ellis admits, the committee members ideas were a little pie in the sky. He recalled one committee member in the early days rhapsodizing about Cleveland students going off to college and enjoying bright, prosperous futures.

According to Ellis, the school's straight-talking principal replied, "You know, I'll be happy if our students graduate, get jobs and don't go to jail."

Teachers initially weren't too jazzed about the project, Ellis said. "When this started the teachers were standing back and saying, 'We don't know if we really want this tech stuff.' Now they're complaining the Internet isn't fast enough."

Ted Best, a Gates Foundation employee who is helping Cleveland with its transformation, said he's noticed a shift since he started working with the school in the spring. "The staff is more optimistic, more energetic," he said. "People feel like, 'Yes, we can do this.' I think we're on the right path. I really do."

Cleveland is planning to start several more academies at the school. The number and focus haven't been decided, but one thing is definite -- the steering committee will be on board, providing tech support and helping arrange mentorships and volunteer activities. Ellis said the steering committee decided unanimously to lend its support to Cleveland rather than assisting other schools as well.

"It's a passion thing," he said. "Cleveland is so needy, and the teachers there are working so hard to make things happen."

Ellis is as surprised as anyone about Cleveland's newfound desirability.

"When this project started, Cleveland was the first choice of only about one third of students who went there," he said. "The rest of the students were there because they either got kicked out of somewhere else or couldn't get into where they wanted to go."

Vancy Anderson's son falls into the latter category. Kyle, 15, had always been home-schooled but decided he wanted to go to high school. They both hoped he'd get into Garfield, but he was assigned to Cleveland. Anderson initially had Kyle on a waiting list to get into Garfield, but became convinced Cleveland was a better fit after learning about the Infotech program.

Kyle learned to type when he was 9 years old, and spends much time e-mailing and in chat rooms. Anderson, who attended private schools, questioned Cleveland teachers and administrators about the school's high absenteeism and dropout rates.

She says they were upfront about the school's challenges, and ultimately she decided she was more comfortable sending Kyle to a school with 800 students, compared with Garfield's 1,700.

"I was very excited because it's a small program within a fairly small school. The teachers were excited," Anderson said. "There's an attitude of real world, professional decorum. I think it's great."

Kyle, a 6-foot, 5-inch white teen, doesn't exactly blend in at a school with 90 percent minority students. And he's none too happy about getting up at 5:50 a.m. for a 35-minute bus ride to school. Still, he says he likes the school so far, particularly since he'll be in Infotech classes with the same students until graduation.

Quantica Lott, a junior, was already attending Cleveland when she decided to join the Infotech Academy, seeing it as a good opportunity for a shot at a scholarship. At first she thought the attendance requirements were too stringent. Suddenly she had to cut the goofing off and start taking school more seriously.

But now most of her friends are in Infotech, and she plans to stay in the program this year and next.

"I think we bond and get along more because we've known each other since last year," Lott says.

Classmate Briana Brinson, also a junior, says her Infotech teachers are supportive and helpful. "Everyone puts a lot of effort into everything," she says. Brinson is hoping to get a scholarship to attend the University of Washington and eventually become an obstetrician. "I'm trying to reach for a 4.0 (grade level)," she says. "My grades are a lot better than last year."

There's a downside to Cleveland's recent popularity: It's becoming overcrowded. Howard says there are often about 300 students trying to eat in a lunchroom designed for 150, and two teachers don't have classrooms of their own.

Cleveland will move into a new school in 2007, but it has other challenges not easily fixed by money.

About 60 percent of Cleveland students receive free or reduced-price lunch, a common indicator of income level. Its dropout rate last school year was 8.5 percent, the second highest of the district's non-alternative high schools. Only 5.2 percent of Cleveland's 10th-graders met standards in all subject areas on last spring's Washington Assessment of Student Learning, the state's annual barometer of academic performance.

Cleveland started a new advisory program this fall in an attempt to connect more with students. Groups of 10th-graders meet for 25 minutes daily for help with anything from personal issues to post-secondary planning. Each group has no more than 20 students, who stay with the same adviser for the remainder of high school.

"They get the attention they couldn't get from academic counselors who have a caseload of 400 students," vice principal Rick Harwood says. "It's about building relationships and personalizing what we do for students."

Howard is realistic about the school's problems.

But he remembers when Cleveland was not a destination, and he sees the tide changing.

In the past, the school took "anything that was a warm body" so it wouldn't lose teachers. Now, Howard says, "we're not just taking kids who have been kicked out of several high schools. We're getting kids who really, truly want to be here.

"It's a good feeling to be a little more selective."

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