

A Wall-to-Wall approach

By Diane M. Wilder

One of the strategies cited by Gene Bottoms of the Southern Regional Education Board in his article, "A Vision of the 21st Century," in this month's issue is the high school with wall-to-wall career academies, such as Seneca Valley High School in Maryland.

In Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), there are approximately 42,000 students who attend 24 high schools, and according to *Newsweek* magazine, all of the county's high schools rank in the top three percent for the nation. In 2001, the MCPS Division of Career and Technology Education (CTE) began its focus on small learning communities developed around career clusters in strategic locations throughout the school district. Through these clusters, students can develop the skills and knowledge necessary to make informed decisions concerning their secondary and postsecondary education, careers and a path of lifelong learning.

With a series of "Rigor, Relevancy and Relationship" symposiums and numerous other efforts, CTE was instrumental in educating MCPS teachers and administrators about small learning communities and how this could help improve the high school experience for all students. During this same period, there was a dramatic increase in the number of students who enrolled in an approved career development completer program in their home schools. This represented a blending of the academic and career models to ensure that all students would have a sense of what they wanted to do and/or what interests they wished to pursue after high school.

CTE programs in MCPS are developed in conjunction with all relevant stakeholder groups. Among these groups are parents, students, educators, postsecondary partners and representatives of business and industry. An integral component of successful career programs is the development of strong,

active partnerships with postsecondary institutions and business and industry in the local community.

The MCPS division of CTE has partnered with Montgomery College and representatives from numerous businesses and industry. Together, they have developed Cluster Advisory Boards (CABS) to advise and support the efforts of each of the 11 career clusters. In addition, articulation agreements with Montgomery College have provided the opportunity for students in CTE programs at MCPS high schools to enroll in college courses for dual and/or college credit.

There are 35 pathway programs in the 11 career clusters which provide the basis for developing small learning communities in MCPS high schools. The 11 career clusters in MCPS are:

- Arts, Humanities, Media and Communications
- Construction and Development
- Human and Consumer Services, Hospitality and Tourism
- Engineering, Scientific Research and Manufacturing Technologies
- Biosciences, Health Science and Medicine
- Education, Training and Child Studies
- Information Technologies
- Transportation, Distribution and Logistics
- Business Management and Finance
- Environmental, Agricultural and Natural Resources
- Law, Government, Public Safety and Administration

This rising interest in the significance of career education and its marriage with rigorous academics has led to major redesign efforts in MCPS high schools. Over the past few years, nine MCPS high schools have received small learning community grants from the U.S. Department of Education to redesign their large, comprehensive high schools.

Seneca Valley High School

Seneca Valley High School was awarded its grant in 2003 and implemented a plan for redesign. They chose the academy model and through surveys and interviews with students, parents and the business community, decided on a ninth-grade academy and five career academies.

All students and faculty at Seneca Valley High School are involved in a career academy. Wall-to-wall career

academies started from career and technical programs with the vision to create a supportive and rigorous learning environment for all students. Career academies were chosen as the method that would promote high academic achievement, enhance capacity for further learning, focus on career interest, and encourage student involvement in academic decision-making.

There are now five career academies and a ninth-grade academy. Funding comes from the federal Small Learning Community Initiative grant and the regular school budget.

The ninth-grade academy at Seneca Valley includes teams for three major academic areas (English, social studies and science), as well as “Connections”—a county-developed course focusing on successful transition to high school, study skills and postsecondary education preparation. In addition, students learn about the importance of career decisions and are required to develop a yearlong career-related project.

The five career academies at Seneca Valley High School are:

- Academy of Arts and Media (includes CTE career completer broadcast media)
- Academy of Business and Finance (includes CTE career completers accounting and business management)
- Academy of Human Services (includes CTE career completers early childhood education and secondary education)
- Academy of Science (includes CTE career completer medical careers and biotechnology)
- Academy of Technology (includes CTE career completers automotive technology and the National Academy Foundation Academy of Information Technology)

Building Ongoing Relationships

Students were divided into small groups (17 or fewer) in an effort to help them establish meaningful relationships with adults in the building and other students outside of the regular classroom. Ninth-graders were assigned alphabetically, and 10th- to 12th-graders were teamed by academies. Advisories meet weekly.

There is also a business advisory council comprised of 19 local business and government community members. It includes five officers of the PTA and other parent representatives as well. The council supports the academies through internships, job-shadowing and mentoring. They actively support projects related to career academies/smaller learning communities’ initiatives and are an integral component in decision-making.

Through the participation of academy leaders on the school Instructional Council and regularly scheduled

An International Visit

The challenge to educate young people about today’s world of work is one faced by school systems in our nation and all over the world. This was the focus of a visit to Seneca Valley High School in Montgomery County, Maryland, on Thursday, March 23, 2006.



The visiting group was led by Nohra Pastrana, wife of former Colombian president and current Ambassador to the U.S. Andres Pastrana, and Acting Assistant U.S. Secretary

for Vocational and Adult Education Beto Gonzalez. The group also included Third Secretary and Cultural Attaché for the Embassy of Colombia Ana Maria Currea, Maryland Assistant Superintendent of Education Kathy Oliver and Jean-Marie Holly, program manager of career and technical education for Maryland.

The Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) initiated the visit, and Executive Director Jan Bray and Sandy Mittelsteadt were ACTE’s representatives. The visit was coordinated by director Shelley Johnson and instructional specialist Diane Wilder with the division of career and technical education for Montgomery County Public Schools.

As Pastrana and the group entered the biotechnology laboratory, students were engaged and, of course, curious. However, one student appeared overly excited and near tears as Pastrana was introduced. This young lady then revealed that she recently moved to the U.S. and was a student in Colombia when Pastrana’s husband was president of the country. The student explained how excited she was by having the opportunity not only to learn the rigorous science, as she had done in Colombia, but to have an opportunity to apply it in a school laboratory and at internship sites such as the academy program at her high school.

About Wall-to-Wall Career Academies



meetings with guidance, staff is updated on career academies/smaller learning community changes. The wall-to-wall career academies at Seneca Valley High School are a work in progress.

An effective curriculum strategy that the career academies have incorporated is the “Presenter Series,” which brings in speakers from all career academies and pathways. Presenters meet with students in small and large group settings to share career challenges and success. Students have the opportunity to interact with presenters to address their academic and career goals.

The structure of the career academies at Seneca Valley clearly reflects the significant role of CTE. Career completion programs were previously a major part of the comprehensive program at the school and were infused into the academies as pathways students could select. By doing so, students accomplish two results. First, they fulfill the state of Maryland technology education requirement. Second, by completing a Capstone Activity in their senior year, they fulfill the requirements for academy credentials. The Capstone Activity could include internships, research projects and a choice of taking a college class through one of several avenues. One program, College Institute, provides the opportunity for students to take college classes at their home school taught by college instructors who come to the high school campus.

Redesigning Success

The principal of the school, Suzanne Maxey, has been totally supportive of this effort to redesign the school. Leadership is the key at all levels, given the extensive change to the traditional high school design that these efforts require. Seneca Valley’s small learning communities are led by a staff that includes an academy coordinator and an academy lead teacher for each academy.

The academy coordinator is Sheila MacLeod, and the lead teachers include Jeffery Baker, Academy of Arts and Media Studies; Kimberly Jackson, Academy of Business and Finance; Sharon Gardner, Academy of Human Services; Nova Cobble, Academy of Science; and Lauri Friedman, Academy of Technology.

Since the implementation of small learning communities at Seneca Valley, there have been numerous improvements in student achievement. These include higher SAT scores as well as state test scores. A larger number of students are in honors and advanced placement classes, and the number of students entering two- and four-year colleges has increased.

It will take time for the data to be gathered to validate small learning communities as the factor responsible for these advances. However, the redesign of the school represents the most significant initiative over the past several years that may most probably explain the upward trends.

Wall-to-wall career academies/small learning communities (SLCs) are a whole academy/SLC concept. Across the nation, high school principals are making this statement: Career academies/SLCs are helping students learn in our school. It’s not fair that they benefit just a few students; we need all of our students to be in such a nurturing environment. Thus, wall-to-wall career academies/SLCs are the fastest-growing high school reform movement in the country.

Creating one or two career academies/SLCs around students’ interest involves a subgroup of teachers and students in the school. That academy/SLC attracts students and builds a team of committee teachers. That is an optional environment, and research shows that it benefits student achievement and teacher satisfaction.

Developing a career academy/SLC within the larger high school is completely different from redesigning the entire high school for all students and staff to be involved in the career academies/SLCs. Wall-to-wall career academies/SLCs require schoolwide changes. Every student in the high school is enrolled in a career academy.

Academies/SLCs generally number four to eight and are broad-based with majors or pathways within them. Wall-to-wall academies usually develop from high schools that have one or two academies. Students must choose a career academy/SLC to attend, just as they would choose a major in college, and the design allows for students to transfer between academies.

For more information on career academies/SLCs, contact Sandy Mittelsteadt at smittelsteadt@acteonline.org.

One of their greatest challenges at Seneca Valley was earning the commitment of the full staff to develop the career academies/smaller learning communities. Change is always difficult, and successful career academies/smaller learning communities in a school require significant change in many ways. Major areas of change for Seneca Valley High School included curriculum content, scheduling and even the location of departments in the school. They found the best way to address these problems was through ongoing staff development and the involvement of staff in the decision-making process.

Wilder and MacLeod understand the challenge, and they offer this advice for educators or community leaders: Identify a core group of staff that believes in the career academies/smaller learning communities concept and provide them with time and opportunities to investigate and see other academies. Then devise a plan, and jump in!

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