

EXTREME SCHOOL MAKEOVER

CAREER ACADEMY EDITION

By Susan Thurman

SOMETIMES A GOOD SCHOOL CAN BECOME AN EVEN BETTER ONE WITH A CAREER ACADEMY MAKEOVER.

Susan Thurman

is the community education liaison at Red Bank High School in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She can be contacted at thurman_susan@hcde.org.



When Tennessee's Hamilton County school district received an \$8 million grant for school reform from the Carnegie Foundation—which was matched by the Public Education Foundation—our approach was different from the other 10 systems that received the grants, because our system is different. Our district is made up of a number of very different schools. Some are very small, while others have as many as 2,000 students. Some are rural, some are suburban,

some are inner-city schools, and others are magnet schools. So instead of a district-wide plan, each school made its own plan for implementing reform through the grant funding.

I had been teaching health and physical education (we call it wellness in Tennessee) at Red Bank High School in Chattanooga for 31 years, when the principal came to me in December of 2001 with the plan for our school makeover. He told me we had to have a career academy, and we had to have it in place for the next school year.

I had a new title, community educational liaison, and immediately began researching career academies on the Internet to find examples of successful ones, and I began going to conferences to learn more about the career academy model. I added academy director to my title of community educational liaison and change coach.

We had to decide what the best choices for academies would be for our school, and that became clear through a survey given to the

student body and an assessment of the community needs and resources. The number one choice of the students was a health academy. Not only does our school border a hospital, but there are 18 health care facilities of some type within a two-square-mile radius.

The second choice of the students was a teaching academy, but we decided that it was going to be such a major undertaking that we should start with one academy and make sure we did that one well before adding another.

Going out into the community and talking to health directors and CEOs at hospitals reinforced our decision. After I spoke to the Chattanooga Area Health Directors, they came to me and said, "We want to adopt your academy."

The teachers we approached were equally positive about a health academy. When we asked them if they could put a health career focus on what they taught and if they wanted to be a part of a health academy, the answer was an enthusiastic yes.

With the benefit of the grant money, we have had more than 60 teachers make site visits and attend conferences across the country in the last five years. This amazing opportunity helped us as a school to have a better understanding of the career academy concept and how we could make it work at Red Bank High. We had retreats for teachers to be able to work uninterrupted and to help develop the career academies in our school. We provided many professional development opportunities to give teachers the support they needed to succeed.

When we went into the community to provide education about our academies, the typical response was, "I wish they had this when I was in school."

Everything began falling into place.

Bus Driver, Move That Bus!

The health academy opened in 2002, and my goal was to receive national recognition within five years. We did it in three, with our lead teacher, Sandra Cox, being named the national career academy teacher of the year, and the partnership between the Chattanooga Area Health Directors and Red Bank High School being recognized as the community partnership of the year by the National Career Academy Coalition.

The reception by the community and the enthusiasm of the Red Bank High School staff has opened doors for our students. Students have the opportunity to work in hospitals and even observe surgeries. The Chattanooga Hamilton County Medical Society invites students to spend a day learning what it is like to be a doctor. The students are assigned to a doctor and go to surgery with him and to his office where he fills out paperwork, and they make office calls with him. Patients are informed ahead of time and can



The teaching academy was the second academy implemented by Red Bank High School and has already received national recognition.

opt out, but we have yet to have anyone do so.

Health academy students also experience working at a nursing home, where they learn to feed, bathe and perform other tasks involved with the care of the residents. They get a real taste of what it is like to be a nurse.

The doors of hospitals and nursing homes are not the only ones opened to Red Bank health academy students. The academy has also opened the doors of colleges and universities for our students. Some have been given opportunities they never expected to have, such as the young woman who received a full scholarship to Vanderbilt University to become a nurse anesthetist.

Red Bank health academy students also have the opportunity to tour East Tennessee State University (ETSU) and Quillen College of Medicine. Students hear mini lectures from professors, have lunch with the first-year medical students and participate in a lesson with a simulation patient. The students visit the gross anatomy lab, although they don't see the bodies out of respect for those who have made those donations. They do, however, have the opportunity to see parts of the human body and are shown, for example, a healthy brain and one that has suffered a stroke, or a healthy lung and one with cancer.

The doctor will then say, "There are the gloves. Put them on," and the students get to hold these organs in their hands.

On the bus trip home, the students always say it was the best field trip they have ever had.

The Next Phase

With the health academy successfully in place, we opened the teaching academy three years ago. Some of the teach-



ers on our staff got together and wrote the curriculum, which begins with exploring teaching as a career and studying education and its history. The second course is arts in education, in which half of the time is spent on learning how to incorporate arts into every academic area, and the other half is on public speaking.

The third part of the curriculum is methods and strategies of teaching, and the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga was so impressed with that part of the curriculum that students enrolled are admitted into the university's school of education and can

earn up to 10 hours of dual enrollment credit.

Like those in the health academy, students in the Red Bank teaching academy receive real-life experience in their chosen field of study. They do one-on-one tutoring of children with Down's syndrome, helping them with tasks such as counting money as well as reading and writing. One class tutors first graders every Wednesday.

Through our school's partnership with the Creative Discovery Museum and the Siskin Institute for Children, Red Bank teaching academy students were trained to help elementary children understand what it is like to be a child with a disability. An exhibit at the museum called "Kids Like You, Kids Like Me" uses goggles to simulate blindness, special gloves to limit use of the hands, and other devices that, when put on a child without a disability, demonstrate what daily tasks are like for a child with a disability. Using such devices and others such as wheelchairs, Red Bank students help bring this experience to life for elementary school children visiting the museum.

As a part of the applied methods study, our students spend two blocks a day at the neighborhood elementary school participating in a mini student teaching experience. They help with teaching lessons or whatever the teacher needs done that day.

One of the elementary school teachers says, "I love

having your students come, and our kids love it too. I never have to tell them what to do, because they know what to do, and they do it very well."

The teaching academy has also received national recognition. It was named the 2006 National Career Academy by the National Career Academy Coalition at their conference in San Francisco last fall.

Leading Into the Future

Our third academy in our extreme makeover—school edition was the leadership academy that is through our Junior ROTC program. This academy does not push students to go into the military but focuses on community service and positions in business and government.

The ROTC instructor is a retired Colonel and an engineer, so he is very strong in the mathematics area and does a lot of tutoring with the students. The leadership academy students have the opportunity to hear from a number of exciting speakers—from judges to Senators and Congressmen to community and government officials.

Success for the leadership academy can be measured in the impressive 100 percent graduation rate it has produced—and 74 percent of these students are attending college. Over the last four years, these academy students have been awarded more than \$500,000 in scholarship monies.

Major studies is the last academy we developed. It is an umbrella for five career pathways, which include business technology, math and science, exercise science, humanities and fine arts, and communications.

Communications, in which students learn about broadcast media such as television and radio, is proving to be extremely popular. Students produce the "Mane News" each day (the school's sports teams are the Lions), with different anchors presenting information about events at the school. Students in the communications program have already won national awards, and some have gotten jobs at television stations.

Communications is so popular that, in a perfect world, it would be an academy unto itself. That is a decision to be made by the school system and will be dependent upon the hiring of another teacher. We could already use three of the one teacher we have, since he often works 16-hour days.

Beginning an academy means getting an advisory board in place and arranging job shadowing, internships and cooperative learning experiences for students. We want students to get their first choice when it comes to our academies, and so far that has, by some miracle, always worked out.

Red Bank's ninth-grade academy gives students time to make those decisions, because they don't make their choices until the spring of the ninth grade. The school also holds an academy fair to help students and parents with making an informed decision. After one year in an academy, a student can change if he or she decides it



The leadership academy is through Junior ROTC but focuses on community service and positions in business and government.



Communication is so popular at Red Bank High School that it may become an academy unto itself.

was not the right decision, but that can only be done one time.

The ninth grade academy was put in place after a year of planning, and it has made a difference for students in that critical time of their education. The year before last, there were 73 of our approximately 370 students who had to repeat ninth grade. That figure dropped to 19 after one year of the ninth-grade academy.

Red Bank High School has been a good school for many years. We led the county in ACT scores, and our students received millions of dollars in scholarships. But that did not happen for all of our students, and some were falling through the cracks. By creating career academies at Red Bank, we have given students groups with which they can identify and in which they gain a sense of belonging.

One mother whose daughter was accepted into the health academy wrote me a letter telling me how much it had meant to her daughter. Her daughter had never made a sports team, and she had never made a cheerleading squad. "This is the first thing she has ever been accepted to," the mother wrote.

It means a lot to these young people to be accepted and to feel that they belong. At Red Bank High School, we knew it was our job to create that feeling of belonging, to narrow the cracks through

which some of our students were falling, and to institute a program that would make them excited about getting up in the morning to come to school.

In every extreme makeover, there is a final reveal. In our case, it is not final but ongoing. As we continue to analyze data, we have seen attendance rates improve to 95 percent, failure rates decline, serious discipline issues drop, and graduation rates increase. All of this has been accomplished by a staff that was willing to go the extra mile to personalize the education of our students, provide a rigorous and engaging curriculum for all students, and involve the parents and community in our educational process.

While many challenges remain, the rewards of being a teacher are unparalleled. Our extreme makeover has made us all look very good and made us proud we chose this profession. **T**

