

Minnesota Principals Academy – Action Learning Project

Jamie Bente

Faribault High School 9th Grade Academy

The issue: For the second year in a row the data shows that 28% of our 9th grade students fail one or more classes during their first year at Faribault High School. This creates a bubble of students needing extensive credit recovery in a 6 period schedule system with little room for alternative coursework beyond our graduation credit requirements.

There is no single root cause of 9th grade failures; it is a concern across our conference, state, and nation. There are many reasons for this issue, some anecdotal and other supported by data, including the following observations...

- The current structure at FHS does not adequately provide the academic, social, or emotional support many 9th grade students need to make the proper adjustments required for high school success; students are, in essence, overwhelmed with the transition to high school and are in need of school-wide, on-going support.
- Many students come to FHS with no vision or understanding of a high school diploma and its impact on their future, nor do they understand the responsibility and self-regulation needed as next level high school learners; they are used to a “low stakes” schooling experience.
- Many students lack ideas of what they might want to do in their future, thus being very short-sighted in their goals or pursuits; teachers are concerned about apathy, engagement, and time management skills.
- Many students show a deficiency in reading, writing, and other skills required for success at FHS.
- The current FHS curriculum and graduation credit requirements offer little flexibility for adding any type of required coursework to help with the 9th grade transition
- Staff and student leaders see behaviors and attitudes that struggle to align with our core values of respect, caring, honesty, and responsibility.

The Opportunity: To impact the 9th grade culture at Faribault High School and to increase the achievement levels of 9th graders through a preparatory, “academy-like” schedule in their freshman year. This “Falcon Academy” model would also give these students a strong support system.

This academy program could include the following major features and benefits:

1. Develop a 10 year plan—inclusive of high school and six years beyond high school (four years of college and two years of career) – Each student will have a Individual Learning Plan (ILP), learn about careers, and develop appropriate short and long-term goals with the purpose that their high school education becomes a very real and critical step to any goals they might have.
2. Teach AVID skills to all 9th graders – Use this class to assess and teach skills related to

WICOR: Writing, Inquiry, Collaboration, Organization, and Reading...for the purposes of 1) to increase students' skills to meet the demands of our curriculum and 21st century learning; 2) to teach students proven best practice strategies that raise expectations, instill confidence, and impact achievement throughout the school system; and 3) to get all teachers of 9th graders to operate within a system that takes advantage of WICOR strategies, best practices, and shares a common academic language.

3. Character education curriculum – Teach students the attributes and behaviors necessary for academic engagement and integrity, high expectations for individual achievement, and the personal goal setting and reflection process.
4. Focus on literacy development – Along with the WICOR framework, this program will focus on including data interpretation needs based on NWEA testing and/or other assessments. We could also emphasize building a strong common academic vocabulary that is used in all classes across Faribault High School.
5. Utilize the 21st Century Skills- Instructional strategies and assignments would emphasize the development of 21st century skills--critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity-- through project and group-based learning (along with standard individual work) to create an atmosphere that is engaging and requires high-level thinking.
6. Leadership Development- Related to the character piece, teach students what it means to be a leader at Faribault High School, and their community, do some self-discovery work (interests, personality, etc.) and possible addition of a service learning component to the course.
7. Falcon Academy project- Students will utilize *technology and collaboration* to complete a rigorous capstone project related to the curriculum and their experience, which they will communicate in the Academy program class.
8. Spotlight on Success Evening: An event to honor all 9th graders for successfully completing this academy; we could spotlight a few of the projects, allow some students to share, and recognize achievement for honor roll students. This will be a capstone family event.

Proposal: The Faribault High School staff and Principals believe that we need to do more to help our 9th grade students successfully transition to high school. Therefore, we are proposing a program designed to reduce academic failures, narrow the achievement gap, increase student connectedness to Faribault High School, grow leaders, and improve student attendance and behavior. The Falcon Academy will provide a smaller learning environment for a select group of 9th grade students to bridge the transition from middle school to high school. The program will provide a structured, connected and supportive environment where every student will succeed in a rigorous core curriculum. The goal is to have them complete the program on an equal academic level with their peers. Because adjustments must be made to the students' schedules and a new program developed, implemented, and staff trained, we are proposing that the board approve the hiring of an Academic Interventionist (1.0FTE) and a Behavior Interventionist to work directly with these students and help oversee the program. This Falcon Academy would run 3 classes (World History, Physical Science, and English 9), plus a Guided Seminar/Study Skills class that would guide the students in organization, time management, and work completion tasks and learning. There would also be a strong focus on school culture; connectedness and helping the students get more involved in activities at FHS.