

Reprinted from the News Graphic March 7, 2013

Principal Sees Homestead as Runway to College

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Mequon – It's easy for educators to talk about getting students ready for college or careers, but Homestead High School Principal Brett Bowers told a Mequon-Thiensville Chamber of Commerce gathering on Tuesday that it's important to move beyond the "buzz phrase."

"We really pride ourselves at the school at being action-oriented," said Bowers, who has been Homestead's principal since the start of the 2010-11 school year. He is the high school's first new principal in two decades.

During an hour-long presentation and question-and-answer session before numerous community leaders, including Thiensville trustees, M-T School Board members and candidates for both Mequon Common Council and the school board, Bowers outlined some of the concrete changes that have taken place to ensure Homestead's students are ready to move on.

"Our job is to get kids ready for college and careers," he said. "We are part of the runway and launch for something else."

He said the school is making an effort to move beyond simply getting students through high school by take steps to ensure they succeed at that next level, whether it's in college or the workforce.

Bowers outlined several specific steps the school district is taking:

- Expansion of Advanced Placement offerings – Homestead added AP classes to its curriculum. He said there were 14 AP classes offered in 2011-12, the same number is 1989-90. The high school added three classes this year and plans to add another three in 2013-14.

The number of students participating in AP and the total number of classes taken also has increased, he said. There were 327 students filling 711 AP classroom seats in 2011 and 426 students in 1,001 AP seats this year, he said.

Advanced Placement gives students the option of taking a class with a more rigorous curriculum and then taking an exam to earn college credit. In addition to gaining that college credit, Bowers said colleges look for AP classes on transcripts when making admissions decisions. Studies also have shown students who take AP classes are more likely to succeed in college and earn a degree, he said.

Bowers said the number of students who start college but don't finish is "staggering and astounding."

- Dual-credit programs – Bowers said this is a relatively new concept in Wisconsin that already has gained more traction in other states. Students and high school teachers partner with a college and offer a class that result in credit on the high school transcript as well as a separate transcript at the participating institution.

The school district initially got involved in dual-credit classes with Project Lead the Way, a pre-engineering program. It is expanding into business education, computer science, journalism/publications, a reading/writing seminar, accounting and Latin. Homestead partners with the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, UW-Whitewater, Milwaukee School of Engineering, Milwaukee Area Technical College and the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

- AVID – The Advancement Via Individual Determination program will be entering its third year at Homestead. Bowers said many schools do a good job with elite students and those who are struggling, but those in the middle can tend to fall through the cracks. He called AVID “real, true college prep” for those students in the academic middle.

“We know we’re not doing as good of a job as we can of preparing all of the kids who aspire to go to college.”

The program provides study and learning strategies, support for taking rigorous classes and exposure to the college environment to a selected group of students.

AVID helps ensure students are ready for the rigors of college, he said. Bowers gave an example of the need to address that issue. Out of a recent class of Homestead graduates, not one graduate who attended the more selective UW-Madison had to take a remedial college course in English or math, while 22 percent of their classmates who went on to UW-Milwaukee did.

- Flex time – Bowers described the 26-minute period now offered at the end of the school day twice a week as part of this year’s transition to a trimester class schedule. He said it encourages students in good academic standing to choose for themselves how to spend the time. He likened it to office hours that a college professor would conduct.

He said it is a good transition between the very structured K-12 environment and college, where “no one calls your mom and says you overslept.”

College-bound students are moving into an area with more independence and need to make good choices, he said.

“Three months from now, they’re going to step off a cliff,” he said, adding this is a way to “put wings on kids in that area.”

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