

MINNETONKA MIDDLE SCHOOLS

A New and Innovative Approach

BY PAUL MOORE

When Alanna Anglum gets home from school, she takes a short break to check her e-mail and relaxes. Then she gets to work.

Alanna is a 6th grader at Minnetonka Middle School East (MME), where her classes include Honors Language Arts and Algebra. That's right—she is taking Algebra in 6th grade.

Those high-level classes are part of the restructured curriculum implemented this year at Minnetonka's middle schools, a new educational model designed to enhance learning for students of all academic abilities and ambitions.

"It addresses the needs of our struggling learners, our accelerated learners and everyone in between," says MME principal Pete Dymit. "It provides increased flexibility when it comes to options and electives and more support opportunities."

In 2009, the Minnetonka School Board approved a plan that added new honors and higher level math courses, created more world language options for seventh and eighth graders and offered more elective options in addition to music and physical education. The plan also provided increased remedial support and created a homework help center. The idea

was to increase rigor, choices, flexibility and support.

"Every student in the school could immediately feel the impact of the enhanced programs," says Middle School West (MMW) principal Bill Jacobson. "We have been able to expand options, enhance rigor, and focus on excellence in the arts and in service learning. As a result, we have designed and implemented programs that support students academically, socially and emotionally."

The program has been extremely well-received by parents. Jacobson recalls a parent approaching him, eager to share her thoughts on the new model.

"It addresses the needs of our struggling learners, our accelerated learners and every one in between."

"She said her son was finally completely engaged, engrossed, and challenged by his eighth grade honors and Pre-Advanced Placement courses, and his intellectual curiosity is stimulated," he says. "It is tremendous that we have finally moved past the old adage that the only way to make a course more rigorous is to add more work."

Dymit has heard similar raves. "Our parent surveys tell us it's everything we set out to accomplish in terms of goals and targets. We couldn't be more pleased."

Tasha Jacobson (no relation to Bill) has noticed that her daughter Micaela, a 6th grader at MME, is learning how to manage her time. "She's definitely been more challenged academically, but she's getting the hang of it, and she loves it. I think these classes will prepare her for anything at the high school level."

"The teachers make sure you get it," says Micaela. "I really like the Honors Language Arts seminars, because



“...we have designed and implemented programs that support students academically, socially and emotionally.”



we can express how we feel about the book we read and get other kids' perspectives.”

“The honors classes give you an opportunity to feel challenged and do something you can be proud of,” says Alanna Anglum. “They’re challenging, but it’s not like you’re drowning in them. And I love the teachers. They’re so great at making sure everyone is on the same page and not falling behind.”

The addition of more rigorous courses doesn’t mean the struggling students are forgotten. Dymit says he also hears from parents who are appreciative of the extra help now available for their child.

“These were not program changes exclusively for the upper end learners,” he says. “We were adamant that we also strengthen our support for struggling learners. So by adding math skills and reading skills courses, it’s a meaningful intervention. We’re already seeing results.

“The progress these kids have shown is not only encouraging to us, it’s encouraging to them. Because after having experienced frustration and failure for a long time, these kids are starting to see themselves as successful. It helps them redefine themselves as a kid who’s good at math, or a kid who’s good at reading. It really makes a difference.”

One of the most popular new course offerings is STEM, which stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math and gives students a 21st century approach to technology and analytical thinking.

“The STEM teachers are really good,” says MMW 6th grader Carly Lietzke. “We do a lot of different stuff that we

wouldn’t regularly do in science or math. You get to learn more about engineering, which is pretty fun.”

“Parents are giving us a lot of positive feedback about how their child comes home and is talking about STEM at the dinner table,” says Dymit. “We’re also hearing a lot about how happy seventh graders are to be taking art again, and how nice it is to have increased the fine arts offerings, like drama, band, orchestra and choir lessons.”

Middle school administrators spent two years studying and planning the new model. The Board approved the plan for the 2009-10 school year. As a result, Minnetonka Schools have yet another reason to be seen as a leader in public education.

“I’ve received quite a few phone calls from other districts curious about what we’re doing and how we did it,” says Dymit. “I think the word is getting out that Minnetonka has an innovative approach to addressing a lot of traditional middle school needs that have not been addressed in a while.”

So while students like Alanna might have an overflowing plate with sports, dance and extra homework, she wouldn’t change a thing. “There’s times it can be stressful, like if you’re sick and miss a class,” she says. “But you just have to make sure you plan ahead so you can get everything done. And it’s worth it. The classes are awesome.”

