

News

New UCS school opens for struggling students countywide

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By LANA MINI

Utica Community Schools last week announced a new way of learning for students countywide who are struggling to complete high school.

UCS is just one of two districts in the state - Lansing is the other - to this year open an academy that nationwide has improved success rates for students who might otherwise fail and not have the chance to graduate with their peers. It's a program that empowers students to learn at their own pace, use online tools, work alone and in groups, and have individual attention from teachers who serve as mentors when they need it.

AdvancePath Academy is designed to re-engage students to learn in a state-of-the-art technology setting. The new school, open to students countywide with registration currently under way, is housed in a newly renovated facility on Van Dyke just south of 22 Mile Road, in the former Utica Center for Applied Learning building.

"We currently have about 75 Utica students from UCAL who will attend, and any student in the county who needs it can attend - up to 200 students," said Bob Van Kamp, assistant superintendent of learning for UCS. "Statewide, beginning with the class of 2011, will be the most rigorous program we've seen. Every kid must pass algebra II. This school is for kids falling behind and really gives them a chance to step up."

District officials said they understand the importance, emotionally, for kids to graduate with their peers. AdvancePath also embraces technology rather than avoids it, explained the school's new principal, Tim Youngblood.

Youngblood served as the alternative education head for Fitzgerald High School prior to taking on the new role.

"There's always been the battle with kids in school with their tech devices," Youngblood said. "This school embraces their technological abilities. It works with them rather than battle against it."

Youngblood visited AdvancePath schools on the West Coast and saw that the different learning methods for kids benefitted them.

"Whenever a child succeeds, all of us succeed," he said.

Some kids simply do better in schools where there are 200 other students rather than 2,000, added Van Kamp.

The school also opened for financial reasons, said Van Kamp, as state per-pupil funding will pay for it.

At UCAL, a UCS school that was aimed for students who are struggling, the graduation rate was around 30 percent, Van Kamp said. AdvancePath kids have higher success rates.

"Regarding UCAL, we knew we could do better," Van Kamp said. "That's when we started to research other alternatives and chose this route."

AdvancePath is a research-based model where students participate in self-paced learning, using computers to read units (They have the opportunity to skip through chapters if they can prove they don't need them). They will also conduct research, write essays and take quizzes

in a highly interactive, supportive environment.

"This program directly supports our commitment that every child will achieve in our school district," Superintendent Christine Johns said. "AdvancePath will provide a positive environment for students to work with a highly trained staff member who understands their unique needs."

Registration runs through Sept. 2. Students ages 15 and older are eligible to attend. For details, call 797-7000.

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