



Strong-Huttig School District provides Star Academy learning program to students

December 14, 2022

On Tuesday, December 13, Strong High School held a ribbon-cutting ceremony to welcome the district's Star Academy Program.

According to Star Academy's website, the star academy program is a comprehensive program that immerses students in core courses through a hands-on, project-based curriculum that re-engages them towards academic success.

"Our students are working independently as well as collaboratively with each other. The teachers act as a facilitator and the classroom is a student-centered classroom so it's really good for our students who learn best by doing hands-on activities," explained K-12 Principal Rhonda Perry.

El Dorado-Union County Chamber, Star Academy and school officials all joined for the celebration which included an in-depth look inside two classrooms currently learning under the program.

8th-grade student ambassador Dexton Howard explains, "It's hands-on and it's something that we really needed because we were getting behind."

Yvanna Barnes is a 7th-grade student who transferred to the Strong-Huttig School District this year. She explains how the program has improved her core learning skills since moving to the district.

"At my old school, I was really failing in math. When I came here Star Academy showed me how to do it so I got a better grasp. I went from having a D or F in math to having a B or high C," said Barnes.

'It's definitely untraditional'

The program covers 7th and 8th grade coursework, preparing students to go straight to high school upon graduation. Class sizes are capped at 20 students, fewer than the 33 in a traditional classroom.

Much of the curriculum is taught through a computer-based platform with videos and texts that can be read aloud.

But it's not just screen time. Many lessons center around hands-on projects.

Peering over a microscope in his science class at Marrero Middle, Cortez conferred with his partner to answer questions on a worksheet, following along with a computer lesson on plants and pollination.

At a station nearby, a pair of students plugged wires into an oscilloscope, while another poured chemicals into test tubes.

Marrero Middle principal Christina Conforto described the coursework as "a lot less 'sit and get' and a lot more 'hands-on'."



Circling the classroom, teacher La'Tonya Osborne checked on students' progress, answering questions. Under the Star Academy model, teachers serve as "facilitators," allowing students to engage in "productive struggle," Gilbert said.

"It's definitely untraditional," Gilbert said. "But the traditional way has not worked for these kids."

Social Emotional Learning

Braided into the curriculum is what Gilbert calls “social-emotional learning.” That includes teaching students how to respectfully disagree with one another, work together and appropriately argue a response.

When picking teachers for the program, Gilbert said they sought candidates with empathy.

In his social studies classroom, at the top of the white board, teacher Ralph Kidd wrote: “Be Brave! Believe in Yourself.”

“At the core, they’re really good kids, and they have a lot of potential,” he said, adding that many have faced “traumas” beyond their years.

Michele O’Steen, assistant principal at Marrero Middle, said students that are held back often “shut down” behaviorally, knowing that they’re behind and can’t catch up.



But grouped together at the Star Academy, many of those students for the first time “don’t feel ostracized” for being older, Gilbert said.

Khamari Bellamy, 15, spent much of last year getting in trouble. Now, he’s close to making the Honor Roll.

“Just ask my mom, I talk about school everyday,” he said.

Aderrian Badon, 14, credited the computer program for helping him to slow down and process the material

“Last year, I was rushing through the year,” Badon said. “Now, I don’t want it to be over.”

Working towards high school

Earlier this year, the students took a field trip to John Ehret High, to get a sense of what they're working towards. College visits are also in the works.

"We constantly tell them, 'you're going to high school next year,'" Conforto said.

Jefferson Parish already sends students who fail 8th grade to high school as "transitional" students.

But of the 800 students advanced under that program in 2017-2018 school year, only 49% graduated in four years, Gilbert said.

"We're taking care of half the problem. But what about the other half?" she asked. The answer, she hopes, is the Star Academy.

The program is funded for at least the next three years, thanks to a combination of federal pandemic aid and a \$720,000 grant from the state Department of Education.

For students like Cortez, the program has been a godsend.

"It's been a really good year so far," he said. "Now that I'm here, I feel I'm able to focus much better."



See the article at: https://www.nola.com/news/jefferson-parish-star-academy-helps-students-catch-up/article_7850188e-6a82-11ed-9b56-37cac789001e.html

Written By: Blake Paterson, Staff Writer, NOLA.com

Released: Nov 27, 2022 - 10:26AM