

Reinvention of Ky. school includes free computers, college classes

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EMINENCE, Ky (WHAS11) -- With an aim to be the most innovative school in Kentucky, if not America, the Eminence Independent School District in Henry County announced its reinvention on Tuesday, complete with Apple MacBook Pro computers for every high school student and an express ticket to college.

"We work at the Disneyworld of schools," said Eminence Independent School District Superintendent Buddy Berry. "It is a treat to show up every day."

The program is called School on F.I.R.E (Framework of Innovation for Reinventing Education).

Starting this fall, the 600 students K through 12 will attend core classes just three days a week. The other two days will be set aside for what the district calls "interventions, connections and enrichment," including free college classes at Bellarmine University in Louisville.

"What is this distinction between high school and college? It really is artificial," said Dr. Joseph McGowan, Bellarmine University President. "It has to do with how much time does it take to master a certain amount of content and then go into another area, master a certain amount of content. Well, how about we blur those lines a little bit more and focus on outcomes and see what happens and move them along?"

By the time Eminence students graduate, some will already be one-third of the way through college.

"I have four children myself, that's \$160,000 potential dollars that it's going to save me as a parent let alone as an administrator," Berry said. "We graduate about 35 kids a year, it's a \$1.7 million opportunity for every single graduating class at Eminence High School."

"(It's) our next step into the future as a school and the next step for Kentucky," said Cadence Payne, Eminence High School Senior.

The students will board a wi-fi bus on the fast track to college.

"I really think our students are ready," said Nikki Gamble, an Eminence High School Senior. "They challenge everything, they push boundaries and they really just want to grow in their own right and grow as a school and be ready for the real world."

"It's going to be intimidating as a sophomore walking on a college campus but I plan on taking full advantage of it though," said Trevor Payton, an Eminence High Freshman.

The program is seen as unique in the United States.

"None like this one that they can maintain their senior status, go to prom, play soccer, do the kinds of things that seniors need to do but get the academic advancement that they need from Bellarmine," said Doris Tegart, Bellarmine University Provost.

The transformation is also happening within Eminence Independent School, itself.

"The real change factor that is going on right now is teachers are learning to take hold of the power of the student voice," Berry explained.

When faculty seemed intimidated by the new computer technology to be formally added in the fall, Superintendent Buddy Berry called in a secret weapon... his third grade daughter.

"I got the computer from my Daddy, and just started making up one on my own," said Brooke Berry.

For three hours during a teachers' professional development day, the nine year old surprise instructor fielded teachers' questions how to use an Apple program.

"All these different cool things to teach the teachers what to do and how to do Keynote," Brooke recalled.

Is it hard to use?

"Not too hard," she said.

Is it hard for an adult to use?

"If it's the first time, maybe a little bit," Brooke acknowledged.

Her father said the third grader's computer instruction was "a turning point in our school."

When the school year started, Berry estimates only a handful of teachers were proficient with the Apple MacBook Pro computer.

Now?

"We're at 85 percent," Berry beamed. "Those are teachers who many of them were not emailing five years ago. And now they are embedding high end technology into everyday lessons."

Student progress is also undergoing a digital transformation.

"Every kid will be tracked with the standards they have mastered from Kindergarten all the way to 12th grade," Berry said. "So we'll know, it will almost be like a doctor diagnosing what's wrong or what's going well and we'll go and prescribe exactly what that kid needs to match the next level of mastery."

While the innovations resemble a charter school, Berry says they are being accomplished within the confines of Kentucky state law, which does not allow charter schools.

"Charter schools tend to happen for a select population," Berry said. "This is for every kid who walks through the door of Eminence schools."