

## **Eminence Ind.'s School on F.I.R.E. program, which changed the district's approach to education, set to receive KSBA PEAK Award**

Eminence Independent Schools to receive KSBA PEAK Award

The Kentucky School Boards Association will present Eminence Independent Schools officials with the Public Education Achieves in Kentucky (PEAK) Award, Tuesday, Dec. 4 at the Eminence School following a 9 a.m. demonstration of the district's winning School on F.I.R.E. (Framework of Innovation for Reinventing Education) program.

KSBA established the PEAK Award in 1997 to focus statewide attention on outstanding public school efforts aimed specifically at enhancing student learning skills and, in doing so, to promote the positive impact of public elementary and secondary education in Kentucky.

Eminence created the School on F.I.R.E. program when district officials began taking a hard look at their schools and discovered some tough facts that were hard to ignore.

"We were losing quite a few students," said Eminence Superintendent Buddy Berry. "They were starting with us but leaving to finish elsewhere ... we had a deficit in enrollment. And we had another concern, that students were qualifying for college but were not finishing college. I think that is a national trend as well, and it was definitely true for our students, also."

To stop those trends, the district reevaluated most of its approaches and created School On F.I.R.E. to give its students not only the education they needed, but one they wanted.

School On F.I.R.E was created after seeking input from all students in the district, asking them what they wanted in their schools and what they didn't; what the district was doing well and what it wasn't.

"Overwhelmingly, the students said we need to be doing more in the area of technology," Berry said. "And, we had no AP programs, so our high school and middle school students said, 'A lot of us and our friends have looked at leaving because we were not able to have the high, rigorous classes that an AP high school would offer.'"

That has all changed this year. The district started a one-to-one initiative at the high school, providing every student with a laptop, and students can now earn college credit by actually going to college. The biggest change was to the traditional school schedule: It no longer exists at the high school.

"Our entire model is based on mastery – we want every student to master every standard," Berry said. "In order to do that, students take their core classes on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and then on Tuesdays and Thursdays we implemented an ICE model, which stands for Interventions, Connections and Enrichment."

For students on the enrichment path, that means Tuesdays and Thursdays taking classes on the campus of Bellarmine University in Louisville – with tuition discounted 92 percent by Bellarmine and paid for by the Eminence school board. These students also travel to and from the campus on a Wi-Fi enabled school bus, using those three hours of travel time weekly for learning.

Senior Brenna Raisor said not only has the chance to attend classes at Bellarmine given her “everything I’ll need to succeed next year,” but the new class schedule has given students a greater mastery of their lessons. There used to be seven classes a day, each 53 minutes long. Now there are five, 75-minute classes.

“This gives us longer class times, making it easier for the teachers to delve into the lessons and more time for the students to understand them,” she wrote. “... with longer class times I have the opportunity for much more one-on-one time with teachers if I’m struggling with anything, and that is reflecting in my grades.”

To qualify for early college, students must score an 18 in English, 19 on math and 20 on reading on the ACT, which are the criteria to get into Bellarmine.

Students who need intensive intervention or those who need a little help understanding classroom content get that on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“We wanted to do the intervention immediately after the kid started struggling,” Berry said. “So if a kid starts struggling on Monday, the teacher immediately implements an intervention on Tuesday to get them ready for the whole group on Wednesday. By getting 35 percent of our students off campus, we’re able to reduce class sizes on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

Connections students work on comprehensive projects that incorporate many of their core classes.

“It’s a class that is completely built on the common core content, but it’s five or six subjects all meshed into a challenge based class,” Berry said. “For instance, the social marketing class has one goal: break a Guinness World Record while generating as much national exposure for a philanthropic cause as possible, while raising revenue for that organization. So they’re going into business class, into marketing class, into math class, into English class, it’s all those standards rolled together.”

All of these changes have been made with the input of student and teacher VOICE (Vision Of Innovative Classroom Excellence) teams.

“No longer were students limited in their choice of electives,” wrote English teacher Whitney Christiansen in her nomination of the program. “At Eminence, if enough students wish for a class, the staff finds a way to make that class happen. This increases student engagement and performance while meeting the needs of a diverse, yet small population.”

Despite turning the traditional education model upside down, Berry said the district has been able to do it without any special waivers.

“We did not do any waivers of any policies, so we are meeting all seat requirement time,” he said. “This new model is not taking advantage of any waivers; it is potentially available for anybody to do. We’re meeting all the core seat time, we’re meeting all the core graduation requirements, so that’s exciting.”