

At school, a year apart; Freshmen: Glen Burnie High School eases the transition for ninth- graders by segregating them from older students.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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FULL TEXT

Heather Housand is 13 years old and has just discovered how scary high school can be.

Older students necking in the hallways. Piles of homework. Rules. The sheer size of the place.

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To ease Heather and her 550 classmates into the world of teens who drive to school and hold jobs afterward, administrators have opened the Ninth-Grade Academy.

It's an idea borrowed from schools around the country and from Howard County, which began experimenting with such ninth-grade education in the late 1980s.

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"This is different than the typical scatter-gun approach to ninth grade, where students are thrown in with everyone else," said Principal David Hill.

'Acting like ... morons'

More than notebooks and theory, the academy recognizes that ninth- graders aren't as sophisticated as the upperclassmen. Girls huddle on one side of the classroom and giggle about the boys. They field taunts from the "weird" boys on the other side of the room.

Just before Robin Parshook's English class, the boys amuse themselves throwing paper ninja stars at girls, who scream at them to stop.

Parshook sticks her head into the room, and in a stern voice orders an end to the chaos: "You all are acting like a bunch of morons. Cut it out."

Heather is a typical ninth-grader who sits attentively in algebra class one minute and threatens to fight a boy across the room a second later after teacher Robin Schmidt asks the class to write a letter to an alien explaining how absolute values are used.

"Dear Heather," one boy calls out, just loud enough for Heather to hear.

"You just wait until this class is over," she says.

The other students smirk, and Schmidt delivers a lecture on respect and not hurting people's feelings.

This is a far cry from sophomores, juniors and seniors who, on the brink of adulthood, saunter into classes that have no invisible barrier between boys and girls.

Results uncertain

Whether it works, though, remains an open question. High schools across the country have begun using academies to deal with early adolescent misbehavior.

While Glen Burnie and North County Senior High schools are trying them for the first time, two Baltimore high schools have had them for several years.

In Howard County, three of 10 high schools have separate wings and teams of freshman teachers. Separate wings will be part of renovation plans at the remaining seven schools.

Eugene Streagle, Howard County's high school administrator, said the experience of several years is encouraging. The number of students failing ninth grade has decreased at some of the schools.

"By their very nature, ninth-graders are the most disorganized group on the planet just by virtue of their maturity," he said. "So anything we can do to help them is an improvement."

Anne Arundel administrators organized the academies on their own. They cost nothing, so school board permission is not required. Hill thought it would work well, especially at his large high school.

"Schools are just not meant to be this big," he said.

Keeping students enrolled

Students in smaller schools, experts say, learn more, get better grades, are less likely to drop out and are more likely to attend regularly. Cases of roaming the halls, smoking, rowdiness, fighting and disrespect decline.

The academy's main intention is to keep freshmen from getting lost. Experts have found that left to themselves, ninth-graders can easily find themselves in quicksand by their first December in high school. Overwhelmed, some drop out.

In Maryland, 5.01 percent of ninth-graders drop out before the end of the school year. In Anne Arundel, the figure was 5.1 percent last school year.

At Glen Burnie, instead of navigating unfamiliar hallways and different buildings between classes, Heather and her classmates remain in a separate section on the second floor of the media building.

To help make more sense of disjointed subjects, five teams teach Glen Burnie freshmen, and they've packed the core classes -- math, social studies, science and English -- into a four-hour block.

Heather learns biology in a room steps away from her algebra class. From biology, it's a quick left turn to her American government class, and that is only a second away from English. And Heather's teachers sometimes coordinate lesson plans to lend cohesiveness.

For example, Heather wrote an essay in her English class about anarchy, a topic discussed in government. Later, she will read "To Kill a Mockingbird" in English class while she learns about civil rights in government class.

That fine-tuning is lost on Heather, who says the best thing about ninth grade has nothing to do with team teaching or block scheduling.

"The best thing is I don't feel like the youngest person," she said. "I eat lunch with everyone else, and we all blend in."

Illustration

COLOR PHOTO; PERRY THORSVIK : SUN STAFF; PHOTO; PERRY THORSVIK : SUN STAFF PHOTOS;
Caption: "Worried": Heather Housand talks with classmate Erich Scanlon during science class. "I was worried about getting lost" at the school, says Heather.; Transition: Glen Burnie High freshmen Crystal Gross, Sara Deleon and Heather Housand (standing, from left), eat a snack before class begins.

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