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## Redmond High is focusing on freshmen ... so freshmen won't give up on school.

'We will not accept failure,' says Principal Jon Bullock.

By Sheila G. Miller / *The Bulletin*



[Anthony Dimaano / The Bulletin](#)

Redmond High School freshmen Nichole Sacco, from left, Kyle Campbell, Derikk Stapleton and Madison Demoran, all 14, chat Thursday during their freshmen-only lunch. The students are part of the Freshman Academy at the school, which aims to promote students' success by limiting their interaction with the rest of the school and keeping close tabs on every student.

Freshmen are corralled into one hall of Redmond High, where they receive instruction from the same set of teachers throughout the school year and spend time primarily with other freshmen.

REDMOND —

There is a wall in Shay Mikalson's office plastered with computer printouts filled with data about every freshman at Redmond High School. The wall lists test scores and absences, tardies and behavior referrals.

Here at the Freshman Academy, ninth-graders can run, but they cannot hide.

As the academies development director at Redmond High School, Mikalson has worked with Principal Jon Bullock and teachers to create a program for ninth-graders that keeps them from dropping out or falling behind in their academic work at the 2,200-student school.

The result is the new academy system that breaks up the high school into a variety of smaller schools. And at the forefront is the Freshman Academy, which is already paying dividends for formerly frustrated teachers and confused students.

“We’re not waiting to the end of the year to see the results,” Bullock said. “Nobody slips by.”

### **A new system**

It all started in 2003, when the high school started receiving federal grant money to establish smaller learning communities. This year the school firmed up the many academies that now fill the school.

The goal of the academies is that all students will be known by adults in the building. They’re also designed to increase the rigor and offer some relevance for students.

As freshmen, students have several options to start their high school careers. They can take on the International Baccalaureate program at the International School of the Cascades, attend one of two academies in the Hartman Building, or, like most students, enroll at the Freshman Academy at Redmond High.

About 300 of the 560 freshmen have chosen that path.

Once students successfully complete their year in the Freshman Academy, they have a choice between attending career academies focused on one of six subjects: health, business, arts and communication, science, engineering and technology, and human resources.

Students can switch among the academies at will; they are not required to choose a career at age 15, Bullock said.

“They can study anything they’re passionate about,” Bullock said. “If they’re studying something they’re passionate about, it increases their learning capacity.”

### **Plenty of attention**

The goal is to keep students from dropping out or falling behind, and the school is already seeing results. Last year, schoolwide attendance hovered around 91 percent. This year, the freshmen at the school are averaging 94 percent.

Last year, the freshman class at Redmond High started at 521 students. At the end of the year, 16 students had transferred and 33 had not completed the year.

Bullock said that nationwide, statistics show that it is during that freshman year when students make the decision to drop out of school.

“They might not actually leave school that year, but that’s when they make the decision,” he said.

For good reason, too. As middle-schoolers, students are in core classes with the same teachers all year long. When they arrive at a high school, there are more and older students and there is little continuity between classes and teachers during the school year.

Before starting the academy system at the school, students’ class periods varied by trimester. For example, a student might have math with different instructors during the year as his class schedule changed each trimester.

Now, Redmond High students operate on a five-period schedule. The freshmen typically have first through fourth periods together in core classes like language arts and different levels of math before heading off to a freshmen-only lunch. After lunch, freshmen mingle with students from other grades in electives. They have the same teachers in the same classrooms at the same time throughout the year, and all of those classes are in the same hallway, cutting down on tardies and unexplained absences.

“Teachers are in the hall, herding and pushing and moving them into class,” Mikalson said. “Culturally it’s a big change. We know all of them by face instead of wondering, ‘Is that a freshman?’”

### **Academic focus**

The other important change at the Freshman Academy is that students are graded on whether they meet the standards of any given assignment rather than a points system.

On a board in each classroom, the objective for the day’s class is clearly stated so that students know why they’re there.

“There’s no hidden mystery of why we’re doing what we’re doing,” Bullock said. “When they go home and their parents ask them what they did, they don’t say, ‘I don’t know.’”

There really are no zeroes. If a student fails to complete an assignment, an F or a zero doesn’t go in the scoring column. Instead, students needing more time to complete assignments go to Mikalson’s office during lunch or stay in their classrooms finishing their work.

“We will not accept failure,” Bullock said. “If they can get through freshman year, it’s an easy choice to stick with it.”

And so students who need extra time on an assignment receive it.

“The first time a student fails it’s really difficult for them,” Bullock said. “With each subsequent time it gets easier.”

If the school can keep freshmen from ever failing, the theory is that they will stick with school, particularly when they figure out that the adults in the school really want them to succeed.

And there are other options for students who simply cannot or will not do, after repeated interventions, their assigned work. The district provides students with options like credit recovery, online classes and alternatives such as Brown High School.

“When you have a population as large as this, there will be students who self-sabotage,” Bullock said.

But the goal with the program is to minimize the number of students who simply slip through the cracks, sitting in the back of the classroom and floating through while no one notices.

This year the administration is particularly focused on freshmen, but they see the results of the academy already spreading through the school, as teachers have shared their methods and success with other faculty members and classrooms.

“We want to make this the norm in the building,” Bullock said.

The Bend-La Pine Schools also received a small learning communities grant for Mountain View and Bend High, and the schools have started integrating similar programs at those two schools. According to Vicki Van Buren, the executive director of high school education, the schools have placed freshmen and sophomores in communities that have a core group of teachers for four subjects.

Any way it's sliced, students are less likely to give up on school if teachers and administrators know who they are.

"You can't skip class or the whole school knows," Bullock said. "The students know, the teachers know. You can't hide."

For now, teachers are getting regular updates on their students every three weeks that detail how they're doing in each of their classes and other areas of concern, like discipline and absences.

"It's not rocket science," Mikalson said. "We're just trying to keep them from slipping through the cracks."

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