

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Whitefish High School Announces *Freshman Academy - ASPIRE*

Whitefish, Montana - February 20, 2010 - Whitefish High School (WHS) has announced an important improvement to its academic program with the initiation of Freshman Academy - ASPIRE. The comprehensive program will provide each ninth grade student with a nurturing but strongly academic environment designed to provide a successful transition from middle to high school. WHS Principal, Dave Carlson, described the new program, "Freshman Academy - ASPIRE is an adaptation of highly successful freshman 'learning communities' or 'academies' that has been tailored to fit our small community and take advantage of the strengths of Whitefish High School." The goal of the new program is to create a safe and orderly learning environment that addresses the specific social, emotional and academic needs of ninth grade students. Freshman Academy - ASPIRE will be initiated this fall for the incoming Class of 2014.

Program Benefits

Incoming freshmen will enjoy a number of benefits from Freshman Academy - ASPIRE including:

- Small, safe and more personal learning environment.
- Leadership and individual counseling from an interdisciplinary faculty team.
- Focus on consistent and productive study skills.
- Development of learning plans for each student that will serve as the basis for their academic strategy and goals for their entire high school career.
- Incorporation of 21st Century Literacy skills into a strong curriculum of core subjects designed to teach the skills on which self-reliance, personal leadership and successful relationships are based.
- Higher expectations for personal achievement within a challenging curriculum.
- Project based and collaborative learning integrated into the core curriculum.
- Enhanced communication with parents of continuous student evaluation.

Small Scale Learning Environments

Key to the success of the program is the formation of two "teams" of students that divide the group of approximately 135 freshmen into two more personal groups of 65. Each team will have its own faculty leaders who will continuously encourage students, evaluate their performance to identify students at-risk personally, academically or socially, as well as looking at enrichment programs for students who excel. The teams will engage in friendly competition as they work on interdisciplinary projects throughout the school year.

Interdisciplinary Teaching & Continuous Evaluation

The leadership of Freshman Academy - ASPIRE is a team of faculty, administration and counselors working in concert to provide counseling and encouragement based on the individual needs of students. The Freshman Academy - ASPIRE team will evaluate student test data and historic performance reports to design learning programs before each school year begins. The team will meet weekly to evaluate student performance on a real-time basis and will also use standardized test results and semester tests to evaluate performance more formally. This process will allow ample opportunity to adjust curriculum and learning plans during the course of the

year. A major benefit of this process will be enhanced communication to parents who will receive more regular and detailed feedback about their child's progress.

To ensure the success of the program, participating faculty will benefit from professional development through training designed to provide them the skills necessary to implement the new program.

Core Curriculum Integrated with 21st Century Literacy

The strength of Freshman Academy - ASPIRE's curriculum is its collaborative delivery of high quality core curriculum: 21st Century Literacy, English, Earth Science, Physical Education and Health. The element that differentiates Freshman Academy - ASPIRE is its integration of "21st Century Literacy" into the curriculum. This innovative coursework will be woven into the core curriculum throughout the year and includes:

- Learning Skills,
- Financial Literacy,
- Career Exploration,
- Human Relations, and
- Media Literacy.

The program will also be supported by specialized faculty who will work individually with students who need additional support with core skills required for success in the program. Freshman Academy - ASPIRE will provide additional support to the other required core curricula of math and history as well.

Proven Concept Adapted for Whitefish

Freshman "learning communities" or "academies" have been proven to be highly successful elsewhere in Montana and nationally. Montana high schools that have adopted similar programs include Fergus High School in Lewistown, CMR High School in Great Falls and both Kalispell high schools. All report that their programs have been successful meeting core goals ranging from improving test scores to enhancing attendance.

The public school system in Chicago required the adoption of comparable freshman programming in all of its schools as early as 1996. An independent study by Brown University's Education Department Chair, Kenneth Wong, on the impact of Chicago's "Freshman Academy" program determined the program to have produced significant benefits. Interviews of principals and teachers from the participating schools resulted in the following:

- 78% reported improved attendance;
- 71% reported improved testing;
- 63% reported improved discipline; and
- 51% reported improved grades.

Freshman Academy - ASPIRE is tailored for Whitefish in two significant ways relative to larger schools. First, the program is not elective; all freshmen will have the benefit of participating because WHS has the resources to provide it to all freshmen.

Second, most comparable programs isolate the freshman classes in a separate wing of the high school building. Assistant Principal and Freshman Academy - ASPIRE Director, Pat Audet, explained, “Whitefish High is already a small community in which we know each student by name. We felt strongly that it would be a mistake to isolate the incoming class. By providing additional academic structure, we can actually accelerate the integration of the freshmen into the community of students and thereby give each student a better opportunity to succeed academically and socially.”

Responsive to Parent and Community Input

Freshman Academy - ASPIRE is the result of a year of planning in response to a wide variety of parent and community input gathered both ad hoc and formally via the Speak Up Whitefish program. New Principal, Dave Carlson, explained, “Having reviewed an immense amount of materials gathered from the community over the past several years and listening to the concerns of many parents, it became clear to me that creating a freshman learning community would incorporate the majority of the goals and aspirations shared by parents and our community at large.”

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