



PACE Program At TMS Already Showing Dividends

TUPELO, Miss. — At 7:30 every morning, a smiling and energetic Richard Trotter greets his Tupelo Middle School students with a handshake and words of encouragement. And if a High-5 is needed, he'll gladly accommodate.

It's pretty much the norm for all the 7th and 8th graders entering their respective classrooms.

But what separates his class from all the others is the type of learning unfolding every day.

For a multitude of reasons, all schools have students who underperform, struggle to learn or fall behind their classmates. That doesn't mean, however, a student shouldn't be given every opportunity to succeed.

When Dr. Rob Picou was introduced as the new superintendent of the Tupelo Public School District, he challenged the entire community to embrace every student and to think outside the box in terms of success.

Those weren't just words to win a press conference and as a result, a new and innovative program was implemented to assist those students not meeting their educational goals.

PACE, which stands for Positive Alternatives for Continuing Education, was devised to meet the academic needs of 12-15 TMS students. This alternative approach to teaching uses the Apex Learning Program, a digital curriculum designed to meet the distinct needs of students who are two or more years behind.

Principal Dr. Brock English, along with assistant principals Talina Knight and Ian Shumpert, began the PACE training process in July following the recommendation from Picou, who saw success with this program in Alaska. In less than two months, success is already being witnessed at the middle school.

"The students are very excited," said Annette Riddle, who oversees the program. "Prior to the start of school, we met with the students and their parents and told them about the goals of the program. Parents have been supportive and instrumental in helping with the program."

Trotter himself has noticed a difference instantly. Instead of students dragging in with their heads down and embarrassed, he now sees those same students beaming with confidence and eager to learn.

“The Apex Learning Program allows them to work at their own pace and is individualized at a certain extent,” he said. “I’m there to provide with assistance. Other teachers offer their own personal time to help students succeed with this program. Right now, we have five students on track to transfer back to high school before the end of this semester. This is a chance for them to move on from middle school, while getting high school courses and credit toward graduation.”

Apex is set up to teach one unit at a time. Each student begins each unit with an overview. Once the overview is completed, they transition to the study portion of the online course before a review. Following the review, they do a practice, which counts as a grade. Then they take a test, where they must make a 65 to proceed to the next unit.

They can take the test as many times as they want, but no two tests are the same.

“When they see the results, it motivates and excites them,” Trotter said. “It encourages and inspires them to continue.”

Incentives are in place as well, including gift certificates from Dodges or free time to listen to music.

“There is so much room for growth,” Trotter said. “I’m learning, and the more I learn, the more I can implement. But to see the smiles on these kids’ face, it motivates us as well.”

Riddle added it’s key for the kids to have a smooth transition to the high school. So the middle school has teamed with the high school leadership group to make sure all goes well upon the students’ arrival.

“When they are back on track and return to the high school, we want the students to continue to receive the same support there as they did here,” she explained. “That’s so important. We want to give them verbal praise and encourage them, because that does make a difference.”

And making a difference with many moving parts involved is a major component of Picou’s One Heartbeat philosophy.

“I’ve seen it work before, and we’re already seeing it work now,” he said. “It’s been a great group effort, and I commend the leadership of Dr. English and his staff.”

That in itself deserves a High-5.

