

Manager puts FitzSimons on a different course

Philadelphia Inquirer

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At FitzSimons Middle School in North Philadelphia, students will find new rules when they return next week: separate classes for girls and boys, one teacher for core subjects, and more emphasis on reading and writing than ever before.

In fact, social studies and science will be taught through literature, so that reading and writing will still be the primary activities.

And the 625 students at FitzSimons won't change classes every 45 minutes, as they did last year. Instead, they will remain in the same room most of the day, limiting the prospect of mischief when students walk the halls.

So say officials at Victory Schools, the for-profit company that is managing FitzSimons and four other city schools this year.

One more thing: Students probably won't recognize the teachers or principals.

Only five of the school's 32 teachers from last year remain; the principals - there will be one for the boys and one for the girls - are new, too. Most teachers chose to leave rather than face the prospect of working for Victory under a different structure.

Of the 45 schools to be overseen by outside education groups, the exodus of staff at FitzSimons was one of the largest, according to the district's Human Resources Department. All the openings have been filled. "We let people know that this was going to be a different day," said Lynn Spampinato, a former Philadelphia district administrator now heading Victory's education in the city. "The number-one primary thing is to get these kids reading and writing."

Last spring, more than 90 percent of the students scored below the basic level on the state's eighth-grade math test, while three-quarters performed below basic on the reading test.

Of Victory's five schools, the changes at FitzSimons - which include physical improvements such as painting, plastering, repairs and boiler replacement - will be the most dramatic. The company also will manage Pratt, Bethune and Wright Elementaries, all in north-central Philadelphia. They, too, will see new curriculum and the addition of teacher coaches, among other adjustments.

At Pepper Middle School in Southwest Philadelphia, Victory also would like to separate boys and girls for classes but will not take that step until January and only if the community supports it, Spampinato said.

The separate classes at FitzSimons, designed to reduce distractions and put the focus on education, will be unusual in the district, where Girls High is the only single-sex school. Boys and girls at FitzSimons will be together for breakfast and then spend the rest of the day on opposite sides of the school.

Boys' school principal Ernest Lowe, a 1966 graduate of the city's Edison High - an all-boys' school at the time - was drawn to FitzSimons.

"There was a sense of allowing us to grow up as boys, without the pressure of having to impress girls," said Lowe, formerly assistant principal at Rhodes Middle School in Strawberry Mansion, of Edison. "It allowed us to really find ourselves as young men."

Both Lowe and girls' school principal Sandra Hall said they saw advantages to working with an almost all-new staff, many of whom are beginning teachers.

"They gave us the feeling they are excited about the design," said Hall, formerly principal of Girard Elementary in South Philadelphia. "They're not too afraid to tell us that they don't quite know when they need help. I don't find that to be true with most seasoned teachers."

Rena Donahue, 27, who has a master's degree in education and has taught in a suburban Catholic school for two years, suspects that classroom management will present the biggest challenge - "but I'm willing to try."

William Case, 33, who comes to education after a career in sales and benefits administration, previously taught in a charter school for a year and student-taught at Frankford High School last year. "I'm looking forward to the year. I'm excited for a challenge," Case said.

While middle schools typically have a mix of grade-school teachers and subject specialists - such as math and science teachers - Victory opted for all grade-school instructors at FitzSimons because of the focus on literacy. Spampinato said more advanced math and science will be added when education levels improve. "If you can't read, there's no way you'll ever be prepared for higher-level science and math," she said.

Besides core academics, students will get 10-week segments each of technology, wellness, and the arts.

Victory, like the six other education managers chosen to run a share of city schools, will receive additional funding to implement reforms. Victory will get \$857 per pupil in addition to start-up costs. The company will spend the extra funding on 40 hours of staff training; an extended workday for teacher coaches who will be in the buildings until 4:30 p.m.; materials for a phonics-focused reading program and writing curriculum; and after-school reading clinics for students who are behind.

The company did make some cuts, including librarians. Spampinato said the libraries were in disrepair. If funds allow later on, Victory plans to create multimedia centers in which teachers will help students do research.