

The Knightspot

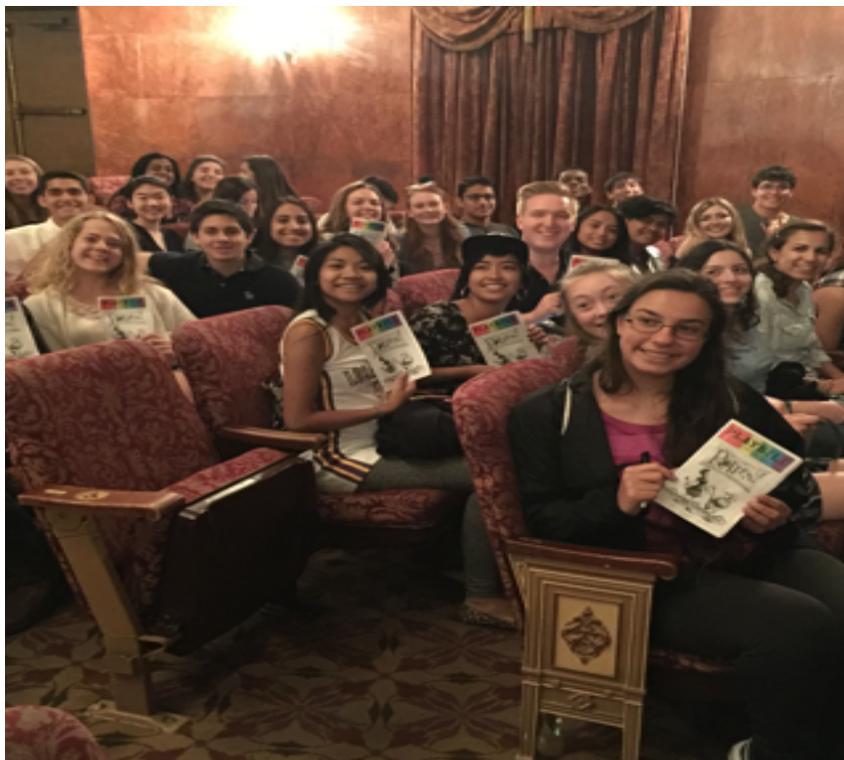
A Spotlight on Education in New Milford, New Jersey.

A Look at the New Milford High School Academies

The Academies @

New Milford High School is an co-curricular program that provides students an opportunity to pursue their own passions and interests. Participants engage in activities beyond the traditional school day to enrich their learning. The program is divided into three domains of specification: Arts and Letters, Global Leadership, and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math). Not only can Academy members hone in on one of these areas, by doing so they simultaneously become stronger candidates for college and career opportunities after high school.

The program is led by Michelle Harle, School Counselor and Academies Coordinator, and Danielle Shanley, Assistant Superintendent, whose responsibilities include supervision of the Academy program. The overall mission is, as stated by Shanley, “to give students something that is meaningful, that is academic, and that allows



Students saw *Something Rotten* starring NMHS graduate, Rob McClure.

them to expand their transcripts with additional credits.” The particular Academy selected by a student indicates the area on which that student intends to focus. For example, a student interested in Computer Science would choose the STEM Academy.

The goal of the Academies is twofold. One is to create a meaningful learning experience for

students outside of the traditional learning environment that helps students explore their own interests. When the program began five years ago, many activities were teacher generated; now the Academies have moved to being 100% student driven. The second goal is to help students create a competitive transcript. NMHS operates on an eight period schedule with one

period for lunch. Therefore, graduates finish with a total of 130 credits which is ten credits over the 120 state requirement. In order to grant New Milford students the chance to be competitive against students from other high schools where more credits might be attainable,

throughout the year. Trips are open to all Academy members on a first come, first serve basis. Some trips occur during the school day; others span several days and overnight stays. The Academies of NMHS operates on a \$20,000 annual budget which helps

Broadway plays. One of the 2016 overnights was a trip to Boston which provided a multitude of experiences, such as college visits to UMass Boston, Emerson and Northeastern University. The trip also included the JFK Library, the Science Museum, a game at Fenway Park and a walk on the Freedom trail.

“How many students are allowed into an operating room to watch a live surgery on a dog happening five feet away?” points out Harle. “We did it at Oradell Animal Hospital. Dr. Carberry allowed NMHS Academy students into her operating room as she operated on Pepper, an adorable puppy. “As she was performing her surgery,” Harle continues, “Dr. Carberry took the time to explain step by step what she was doing. She even pointed out some of Pepper’s organs as she worked around them.”

How do these trips come about? Much of the direction derives from FedEx day in the fall, a day when Academies students have the opportunity to explore interests and determine a passion and a learning path. In addition, throughout the year, Academy students can share a proposal for a particular inquiry. Harle and Shanley review students’ ideas and do their utmost to make those ideas become a reality. “We find a way to say yes as often as we can,”



Oradell Animal Hospital visit on January 16, 2016.

the Academies participants earn one credit per marking period along with a letter grade, for a total of 146 credits upon graduation.

So what do Academy students do? Since the central goal is to provide experiential learning outside the classroom, students go on a number of field trips

to fund these trips and other activities. Since that only allots approximately \$145 per member, students pay their way toward trip fees when necessary. Some trips included a visit to the New York Stock Exchange, a United Nations summit, a behind the scenes taping of the Dr. Oz show, and

comments Harle. This year, there is a group who is currently involved in planning the New Milford Education Foundation Gala to be held on April 20 because marketing is an interest; trips are being planned to museums; a Broadway show, *Dear Evan Hansen*, was already seen; an overnight to Philadelphia will include visits to South Jersey and Pennsylvania schools, historical landmarks, and cultural experiences such as a show or sporting event. One idea still in the works is a TED Talks Youth Summit. So the experiences students have are varied, real-world and solely a result of what they want to learn more about.

In addition, to participating in trips, Academy members are required to complete four projects per year, one per quarter. These range from being student generated to those suggested by Harle and Shanley. One of the frequent suggestions is to read a text from one of the Academy recommended books. Students are encouraged to choose common texts in a given quarter so they can collaborate as they read and react to their reading. "We want students to think about what they've learned about the world themselves or others when they read these texts," remarks Shanley. Participants are asked to give a presentation about

the book and their responses to it as the culmination of the project. Another example of an Academy project occurred last year when members

"We inspire
kids to be
inspired."

-Danielle Shanley,
Assistant
Superintendent.

were asked to create commercials for The Academies program, several of which can be viewed at the end of this article.

Yet another example are those projects that emerge organically such as the implementation of the UNICEF club at NMHS. During a visit to the United Nations a few years ago, a group was inspired when it learned about UNICEF and then worked to establish a club at the high school that could help UNICEF's efforts.

Perhaps the largest student inspired project to date was that of a group of four girls two years ago who attended an Academy trip to a summit on human trafficking at Caldwell College. Touched to learn that this issue affects New Jersey residents, the girls committed to making a

difference. Their work was extensive and included connecting with Rachel Lloyd, the founder of Girls Educational Mentoring Service (GEMS) which works to fight human trafficking and supporting girls who need rescue or who have escaped the life. The NMHS Academy group conducted the Color Run here in New Milford, an enormous undertaking that involved learning about marketing, budgeting, and much more. The girls raised over \$6,000 which they donated in person to Lloyd and the GEMS organization.

In an attempt to allow further personally motivated inquiry along with exposure to online classes, another project option is an online course. Through MIT OpenCourseWare, Academy students can audit a free course on a topic of interest such as coding, medicine, business, engineering and many more. Upon completion, Academy members will present their learning. "The online experience teaches time-management, technology skills and self-discipline," comments Harle. Furthermore, these courses can be referred to in college interviews and on college applications.

The online courses are the way members attain an "Endorsement" in one area. Academy students receive a diploma at graduation that states "The

Academies at New Milford High School” and specifies which Academy that student was a part of: Arts and Letters, Global Leadership or STEM. If a participant pursued a more specific area of interest through district coursework, online classes, internships and personal avenues of learning, that student receives an Endorsement on their diploma as well. Areas available for Endorsements are currently: Fine Arts, Performing Arts, Business, Education and Health Sciences. Additional endorsements have evolved as a result of student interest.

The Academies program is open to any rising Freshman or Sophomore. Shanley and Harle have concluded that in order to reap a maximum benefit, participating for at least three years is essential. This year there are 30 Freshmen, the largest number of Freshmen to date, and a total of 138 members.

How does a student become a part of The Academies? The process begins at DEO Middle School where eighth grade teachers and guidance counselors talk to students about the program. This year for the first time, current Academy students will visit DEO in January to share information with eighth graders and answer questions. Students

complete an application with a statement of interest, and applicants complete an interview.

An Academy student needs to be an independent worker, able to work well with others, and meet deadlines. There is no GPA requirement; however, a member has to do well enough in core academic classes to be able to miss those classes to attend Academies programs without falling behind. An Academy student also needs to be a strong representative of the school and community. Few students are denied acceptance because the goal is not to create an elitist group, but to provide these opportunities to as many students as possible. In the cases where enrollment is not offered, it has mostly been the result of discipline issues. When appropriate, a student might reapply after one year.

In order to give middle school students a taste of the Academy program, some choices have been incorporated into the DEO elective offerings. Previously, students had to

take mandated art, technology or music courses. Now, they have options that satisfy the same state mandates such as Junior STEM, Music of the World, Current Events, and Careers and Robotics. Eighth graders interested in the Academies are also invited to attend certain Academy events as they were last June for the Maker Jam.

The Academies at NMHS are an ever~changing program always being tweaked to better serve its members. In order to provide students with such varied, personally meaningful learning opportunities while at the same time creating a more competitive transcript, change is essential. “We inspire kids to be inspired,” says Shanley. “We are always looking for the best way to do that.” The current enrollment is the largest yet, nearly one quarter of the high school student body, and Harle and Shanley expect this number will continue to increase in the coming years.

Student Commercials

Alyssa Unciano and Kaitlin Batac

Caitlin Walsh and Julia Sidorsky

Lillian Hui

Sharon Eruthickal