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Vision Network grows by 7 schools

Reform program will aid focused improvements

By *JENNIFER PRICE*
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Seven more schools will join the Vision Network to pilot changes proposed in the Vision 2015 public school reform plan.

In June, all middle schools from the Indian River School District, New Castle County Vocational Technical's Delcastle and Hodgson high schools, Capital's Dover High School and Appoquinimink's Townsend Elementary School will join 21 schools across the state already participating in the network.

"This is a sign that we're moving from islands of excellence to systems of excellence," said Paul Herdman, president of the Rodel Foundation of Delaware -- the educational nonprofit that helped develop and fund Vision 2015. "Instead of just isolated individual schools, now we're changing some of the systems to get to larger scale reform. It's a great step, and hopefully people are starting to institutionalize it."

Appoquinimink, New Castle County Vo-Tech, Capital and Indian River all have schools that joined the network in 2007.

In October 2006, a coalition of education, business and community leaders released its plan to revamp the state's school system into a world leader by 2015. Expected to cost more than \$100 million over several years, the Vision 2015 plan suggests reforms such as more time in school each year, a statewide curriculum, more power and accountability for school principals, a uniform statewide pay scale for teachers and greater state investment in preschool education. While the effort has generated some private support, it has not received significant public funding yet.

Schools joining the network will select a leadership team comprised of teachers from various grade levels and content areas. Starting in September, the teams will receive intensive training from the University of Delaware's Academy of School Leadership and Focus on Results, an education consulting firm. The training will help educators use student achievement data, such as state test results, to make instructional decisions that better serve individual student needs. The teams will receive monthly professional development and individual expert coaching on best practices. The schools then will choose an instructional focus -- an improvement area such as increasing math standardized test scores, improving the graduation rate or providing intervention for at-risk students.

Once the new network schools choose a focus, they may apply for grants from Vision 2015 to pay for related programs.

Indian River Superintendent Susan Bunting said because Indian River and Sussex Central Senior high schools have had so much success from being a part of the network, she wanted her district's middle schools to have the same experience.

"We had reached a plateau with our high schools, but through the Vision Network we have been able to really focus on what our students need and set higher expectations for all students," she said. "The Network is a truly comprehensive reform all the way from the district to the schools, and I'm thrilled that more Indian River schools will be a part of the initiative next year."

Indian River High School, which was among the first schools accepted into the network, developed a program that aimed to lower the school's dropout rate using a grant from Vision 2015. Through the

school's Twilight Program, students who have fallen behind can stay after school two days a week from 4 to 6 p.m. taking online courses to make up graduation credits, said Principal Mark Steele. This school year, 13 students have participated, seven of whom are seniors. All seven have passed the courses and will graduate in June, which will bring up the school's graduation rate by about 3 percentage points, Steele said.

Kuumba Academy, a Wilmington charter school, also received a grant from Vision 2015 to fund "Family Math Nights" and "Bring Your Parents to School Day." Under these programs, parents are invited to the school to learn about their children's math curriculum, which is Kuumba's instructional focus.

"It really helped the parents know how to help their children with their homework," said Principal Sondra Shippen. "And it really helps engage our parents."

New Castle County Vo-Tech, which already had its St. Georges Technical High School and Howard High School of Technology in the network since 2007, now will have all of its high schools in the Vision Network.

"Participating in the network has really provided a focus on what's important, and that's instruction," said New Castle County Vo-Tech Superintendent Steven Godowsky. "It's provided a lot of the structure and processes we need to improve student achievement and create world class schools."

Additional Facts

VISION NETWORK SCHOOLS

Indian River's Georgetown, Millsboro and Selbyville middle schools.

New Castle County Vocational Technical's Delcastle Technical and Hodgson Vocational high schools.

Capital's Dover High School.

Appoquinimink's Townsend Elementary School.
