



Should 12-year-olds go to the same school with 17- and 18-year-olds? Darren Linquist wasn't so sure. His daughter, Hanna-Liisa, 13, was determined to leave her friends and the elementary school she'd attended since JK for a fresh start at White Pines C & VS, one of three Grade 7–12 schools in the Algoma DSB. "I was kinda bored," says Hanna-Liisa.

"Hanna-Liisa had always been a good student," says Linquist, "but we saw her losing interest in Grade 5. We were really worried."

Elementary schools in Algoma tend to be small, typically with 100 to 250 students who are often in a split 7/8 class for their final two years, explains White Pines 7/8 Program Vice-Principal Sandra Dal Cin, OCT. By Grade 6, many students have been in the same class with the same kids for eight years.

"We want to help students like Hanna-Liisa who are looking for a fresh start," says Dal Cin.

How fresh? The 7–12 programs at both White Pines and Superior Heights C & VSs were designed to give students a gradual, supervised transition into secondary school within a big high school setting by letting them experience partial rotary timetables in specialty classrooms starting in Grade 7.

Students are taught by subject-specific teachers, they can reach ahead and take Grade 9 courses and have access to strong extracurricular athletics and leadership programs. A new 7–12 program opened this September at Korah C & VS and after positive community consultations last year, a fourth will open next September at Central Algoma SS. Clearly they're popular with kids and parents alike.

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"We have spent a lot of time planning and developing our 7–12 model over the last eight years," explains Superintendent of Education Asima Vezina, OCT. "At its centre is the research from the Ministry's Student Success initiative. We focus on meeting students' learning needs through individualized learning, differentiated instruction, enhanced learning options and exposing them to some of the courses they can take in high school to help them make the right choices when the time comes."



An actual classroom lab enhances science lessons at Superior Heights. Here, Grade 7 students learn about mixtures by combining glue and Borax to create "gloop."

Specialized classrooms

Although the 7/8 curriculum at Superior Heights and White Pines is the same as that taught throughout the board's 38 elementary schools, it's taught differently, Vezina explains.

Each school has intermediate-qualified subject specialists delivering hands-on lessons in existing specialized classrooms. Students learn science in a high school science lab, build projects in a safe and well-equipped wood shop, learn music in a full keyboarding lab, instrumental studio or guitar lab and have plenty of access to computer labs, laptops and other technologies such as Smart Boards.

Vezina says it's often difficult to teach intermediate science in a typical JK–8 school. "Most of our current elementary schools were not built with a science lab to accommodate the curriculum demands of today. Therefore, textbooks are often the main focus of a science lesson."

Shannon Cond, OCT, would agree. She has taught science since helping open Superior Heights's program eight years ago. But before that she taught four years in a K–8 school. With her bachelor of science and J/I science qualifications, she feels this program is just where she belongs.

"Kids love a hands-on, active science class," she says. "We do labs at least once a week. I know my previous students didn't get the concepts I taught them as quickly or easily because I was teaching from a textbook instead of in a lab. Hands-on learning is vital to engage kids in science."

Cond says that many of her students will participate in a science fair for the first time in Grade 7 because they are now so into science.

Annette Wishman's daughter is a perfect example of what Cond talks about. Had her daughter stayed in her elementary school instead of switching to Superior Heights for Grade 7, she would have been in another split class. "She was always a good student, getting As and Bs. Now she's straight As and is more engaged. She's always talking about what they're doing with their hands in science. She loved the science fair. She loves rotary — the different teachers and the variety. She's learned to manage her time and she's doing great."

A unique timetable

The specialized classrooms are one of the key elements of the program's success, explains Superior Heights's former 7/8 Program Vice-Principal Joseph De Rosario, OCT. Another is its timetable.

Every student has a 140-minute morning block (with a 20-minute break) of dedicated language and math instruction taught by a subject specialist. This extended homeroom period is a strong contributor to student success, especially in mathematics.

"In addition to having a daily literacy and numeracy focus," De Rosario explains, "students develop a connection to one caring adult who will continue to be available to them right through Grade 12." And the bonds run deep. The Grade 7 and 8 teachers say they often have visits from former students reaching back for advice, guidance and mentorship.

For the rest of the day, students have rotary for all other subjects. Frank Gioia, OCT, teaches visual arts, music, dance and drama at Superior Heights. He says the school's well-equipped art and music rooms enable him to bring out the best in his students.

"We get to see and work on one group of kids' strengths and needs in math and language every morning and then, during rotary, we teach all of them in our specialty areas. That's what we all love to teach best and where we can be most creative."

Justine Palmer, OCT, who had a long term occasional (LTO) position in Core French at Superior Heights last year, is also a fan of the timetable. In a typical K–8 school she would see every student in the building daily for 20 minutes. Here she was a homeroom teacher for the language and math blocks and one of several rotary teachers.

"What I like about this program is that French is on equal footing with social studies or shop," Palmer comments. "These kids love French and I haven't experienced any discipline or motivation challenges this year."

As Vezina intended, the structured programs have created a teaching and learning environment that breeds student success.

"The kids grow and change right before our eyes in this environment," adds Richard Tomas, OCT. "They are thriving. They're learning at their own pace in a more grown-up social learning environment."



Grade 11 student Taylor Cond (standing) and Grade 7 and 8 students (l to r) Aja Notte, Emma Stafford and Aryanna Harten enjoy Superior Heights's mentorship program.

Special programs

And while all kids appreciate the more grown-up environment, some need more attention. Patrice Amanda Bruni, OCT, formerly at Superior Heights, worked with students needing a slower pace of instruction and more individualization.

"Some had become disengaged for a number of reasons," she explains. "Many were experiencing social, emotional and academic challenges. Although not all of them were on IEPs, they all had particular needs we could address in a smaller, intimate setting."

Bruni's students did not go on rotary. They stayed with her all day, working in ability-level groups with loads of manipulatives and short blocks of hands-on activities. What would likely happen to these kids if they were back in their elementary school?

They'd be in larger classes, for sure, says De Rosario. Many would struggle academically, which in turn would lead to misbehaviour and often removal from class. "I'd see a whole lot more of them in the office," he says. "We see it in their OSRs when they come to us after Grade 6: poor attendance, high suspension rates, behaviour issues. These are frustrated kids starting to disengage. They're perfect candidates for our program."

And what does the data show after a year in the program?

"Better attendance, fewer trips to the office to see Joe and fewer suspensions," says Bruni. "We catch them and when they go to Grade 9, they're re-engaged and have a good sense of their academic strengths."

Not every student's reason for switching schools relates to academics. Braydon came to Superior Heights to escape years of bullying. By Grade 6, his parents say he had no friends, poor grades and a poor attitude toward school. "You don't feel safe," Braydon reflects. "You're always worried and distracted, trying to fix things."

His mother remembers her first parent-teacher meeting in the fall of Braydon's Grade 7 year. She and her husband sat at a table with his teachers, who were talking about this happy boy getting good grades, doing well in school and making friends.

"He's a star,' they said. My husband and I looked at each other, thinking, 'Is this our son?' I cried right there in the room," she says. "They caught him before it was too late. We know he's safe and learning and having fun at school with a good group of friends. They saved our son."

And what about those concerns parents had about Grade 7s going to school with Grade 12s? Turns out, it's not a problem. The 7/8 students use the cafeteria and gyms at different times than the high school students. Their programs operate in separate wings of the high schools and students have their own lockers, washrooms and classrooms.

Purposeful interaction

"Although the 7/8 program runs distinctly from the rest of the high school, there are plenty of opportunities for interaction," says 7–12 Superior Heights Principal Michael McCabe, OCT. "It's not a school within a school."

And there are perks that go along with having the 7–12 mix. Many senior students, for instance, do peer tutoring and volunteer with the 7/8 sports teams. "It goes both ways," says McCabe. "The 7/8 kids gain role models and the high school kids get leadership opportunities."

McCabe explains that the Superior Heights vision includes the 7s and 8s in the high school milieu. "Our goal is planned and purposeful interaction."

The 7/8 students sit on the student council and work on the yearbook. All students attend pep rallies and big games together, and events like the school's pink shirt anti-bullying day and Project ABCD (Action for Building a Community that is Drug-Free) are fully integrated. Last year, senior students helped judge intermediate students' science fair projects and Grade 12s gave their history presentations to the Grade 8 social studies class.

And of course one of the biggest benefits for students is the smooth transition to Grade 9.

"This often-difficult transition is a piece of cake for these kids," says McCabe. "They've already done rotary, they have strong study, time-management and organizational skills and they know the school and its expectations. They don't miss a step."



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