

NOVA TRIES TO LIVE UP TO STAR BILLING

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DAVIE -- — The Nova Center needs a few consecutive years of stellar performance to avoid becoming just another bunch of schools.

Regular schools don't have money for many special positions. Their teachers don't receive special training. Their students don't wait for years to get in.

Being just another school would mean a return to conformity abandoned in 1963, when Nova High opened and students first were encouraged to put down dull textbooks and roam the Davie campus for inspiration.

The 5,400-student center -- made up of two elementary schools, a middle school and a high school -- was built in the 1960s to be educational laboratories where teachers wrote their own texts, experimented with new methods and disseminated their findings to peers across the district.

In 1996, the schools became the Nova Center for Applied Research and Professional Development, adding teacher training to their mission.

But statistics are working against the center. A December report charted a 67 percent increase in student withdrawals for 1996-97 and 1997-98 and a rapidly declining waiting list. And, perhaps most damning, district researchers wrote: "Nova Center has yet to realize the uniqueness envisioned for the Center."

It resurrected the question that has troubled Nova for almost 40 years: Is it worth the money? Because students from across Broward County attend, transportation costs \$1.69 million per year.

The possibility that the original concept could die at the hands of the School Board is one Nova educators and parents, some of whom persevered for years to enroll their children, shudder to consider.

Jean Dorto, like thousands of other Broward County moms, picked up an application in 1985 when she was pregnant and enrolled daughter Lisa, now a freshman at Nova High, in Nova's kindergarten. Today, Dorto marvels that Lisa prefers to discuss advanced placement psychology tests to talking about Friday night parties.

"When my daughter was in eighth grade, she got pamphlets from every magnet high school in the district," said Dorto, of Hollywood. "She gathered them up, threw them in the air and refused to look at them. She didn't want to go anywhere but Nova."

But satisfying parents isn't the only issue, school district officials say. With accountability the most pervasive issue in Florida education today, districts can't afford programs without results. To that end, North Central Area Superintendent Jim Notter, who oversees Nova schools, is proposing a three-year, intense examination of them.

"Can you truly connect, with a solid line, things going on there to other schools in the district and see increased student achievement?" he said. "If it's a squiggly line or a dotted line, it won't be enough."

If a solid line doesn't show?

"Some people in Davie would like to have Nova schools for Davie schools," Notter said.

The School Board ultimately will vote on Nova's future. The schools are in board member Carole Andrews' district, and she says she fully supports them.

"I know they're addressing what came out in the report," she said. "In my opinion, it's a wait-and-see-type situation. We have students who started in kindergarten who are in 10th and 11th grade now. We can't just say, 'That's it.' It would have to be a phased-out process starting with kindergarten."

Beginning research

Nova educators say the report didn't tell the whole story. Amalia Pares-Pomerantz, principal of Nova High, said the 1997-98 withdrawal figures include students who registered for classes but then changed their minds and never arrived for school, falsely indicating a jump. The figures aren't broken down to differentiate those students from others who withdrew midyear.

Nova stopped adding to its waiting list in 1995, so it shrank as students entered school. Today, students are picked by lottery, with adjustments for racial balance and to admit siblings of Nova students.

And research with the goal of publication began just this year, months after district researchers stopped gathering information for the report.

Pares-Pomerantz, employed at Nova High for 11 years, is accustomed to defending her school's uniqueness. She points to newspaper headlines involving her predecessors in 1969 and 1976: "Nova Principal Denies Big Enrollment Decline" and "Report Finds 'Obvious Failure.'"

"I'm not taking away from anyone else, but our faculty culture and parental culture are different," Pares-Pomerantz said. "There is constant self-evaluation by students and teachers. We have expert teachers who give their free time to go into other teachers' classrooms. There's constant collegiate conversation."

Lists from the four schools show at least 59 of Nova's 280 teachers are participating in research this year. At Nova Eisenhower Elementary, teachers compare the results of instructing students in small groups or whole classrooms. A Nova Middle teacher uses art in her English for speakers of other languages reading lessons. One high school math teacher injects humor into lessons and measures how that affects student improvement.

The research is partly funded by a \$442,000 grant from the Southeast Florida Annenberg Challenge, a foundation to improve education through partnerships between public schools and scholarships.

By far the most pervasive experiment, Paideia seminars -- discussion circles where every child has a role -- go on everywhere. In classroom after classroom, students sit in the same round formation, beginning sentences with "I believe" or "I agree because."

At Nova Eisenhower Elementary last week, Sharon Moody's learning-challenged fourth- and fifth-graders studied copies of a letter from Albert Einstein to President Franklin D. Roosevelt on Germany's atomic bomb experiments. Propped up on the chalkboard, Einstein solemnly stared out from the cover of the December 31, 1999, Time magazine that named him person of the century.

The Paideia rules were written in chalk above the magazine: Listen to others before responding, respect others' opinions, one speaker at a time.

The 60-year-old letter prompted unusual discussion for 11-year-olds.

"If Hitler was about to kill the Americans, I think it is only fair that they have the bomb," one boy said. His classmates enthusiastically flashed the thumbs-up sign, the silent Paideia way of agreeing.

Moody and her co-teacher, speech specialist Beth McCarthy, are studying whether Paideia affects special-needs students' performance. For them, the discussion was more than a casual chat about an old letter.

"They're learning critical thinking skills," McCarthy said.

Changing times

Because of their school's mission, Nova teachers must strive to be different. They team-teach with Florida Atlantic University education students and professors. All were picked because they fit into the Nova ideal of experimentation. Twelve are master teachers and open their classrooms to visitors from throughout the district.

Melody Wicht graduated from Nova High in 1972 with dreams of becoming an actress. She came back in 1991 to be a theater teacher. Things had changed.

"A lot of it is financial," she said. "Back in the old days, they had a lot of grant money. They had the planetarium, which was wonderful for studying science. They had an in-house television studio to do the morning announcements. Our studio is long dead and gone."

What hasn't changed, she said, is teachers' commitment to trying new approaches and changing styles to fit individual students. It was something she didn't see during her first three years of teaching in Palm Beach County.

New approaches are evident in Gladys Sossa-Schwartz's English for speakers of other languages class, where students determine the way they learn best before they start class work. Some are verbal, others visual, others logical, and Sossa-Schwartz tries to appeal to their styles.

They don't have proof, but her students say it works.

"If I know my learning style, I'll remember everything," said Yusmila Kessel, 17, a native of Cuba who began at Nova in ninth grade. Her spoken and written English are almost perfect. "If I don't like something and I don't know how I learn, I won't try it."

Sossa-Schwartz began the experiment on metacognition -- "thinking about thinking," her students explain -- this year and will publish a paper for teachers across the district.

At Nova Eisenhower Elementary, veteran fifth-grade teacher Jane Abramczyk is teaching other critical thinking skills. In math, students learn the process of reaching answers, not just a pat formula for a pat answer. They openly volunteer that they got the answer wrong, but they must reveal how they reached the wrong answer and then rework the problem.

The approach is controversial, Abramczyk admits.

"It's good to know times tables, but they have calculators now," she said. "It's more important that they know to multiply. I say take a guess, and who cares if it's wrong? I want to know how you think about it."

To test the theory, she administered one math test based on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test at the beginning of the year and will give another at the end.

Even Abramczyk's students in the school since kindergarten say they know the Nova approach is different.

"At other schools you look at a book, and I think kids find that boring," said Michael Masino, 11. "We usually do things with experimenting. Right now, in my reading group, we're making up our own play to perform for the school and making up our own music."

Student performance

The question is whether Michael and his classmates' academic performance will show Nova is worth the money.

It has cost more than \$1.5 million over the regular school budget to implement a 1996 redesign of the center, which included creating team leader positions that are part guidance counselor, part trainer and part administrator.

And, because the Nova Center attracts and provides transportation for students from all over Broward County, it costs \$437 per year to bus each student there, compared with \$391 in the rest of the district.

Nova students well outperform their district and state peers on the American College Test, the Advanced Placement test and the FCAT. But the schools received only a C under Florida's grading system, based on FCAT reading and math and Florida Writes scores.

Nova parents say that average grade doesn't discourage them. Although 20 percent of parents rated their children's experiences at Nova as fair or poor, most support the school and say they're thrilled with their children's performance.

Parents say they appreciate opportunities to be involved through events such as Parent University, a daylong event at Nova Eisenhower Elementary on Saturday. Open to all Broward parents, sessions will include information on gifted and challenged children, at-home reading programs and making the transition from school to work.

Robin Billings, 36, volunteers at Nova Eisenhower every week. She packed a Nova application in the hospital bag she took to deliver son Gregory, 9. She would have mailed it sooner, but she needed her son's Social Security number in order to fill out the form.

A Hollywood Hills resident, she had been told for years that Nova schools outperformed her neighborhood schools. Billings said she has never regretted taking that form to Hollywood Memorial East or enrolling her second son, Robert, 6.

"I like the idea that my child is going to a research and development school," she said. "He's not stuck in something that doesn't work. It's nice to be a parent of two children who look forward to going to school."

District administrators agree that Nova is different because of its teacher training work, but Tom Guisemar, director of secondary education, says quality teachers work throughout Broward County. And all schools use the Sunshine State Standards -- Florida's statewide curriculum guidelines.

"There are other schools where innovative and effective methods are employed -- Nova schools aren't the only places where they exist," Guisemar

said. "American history is the same at Western High as at Nova. There are great things going on everywhere."

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