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News Sun FORUM

Written. Printed. Published in Highlands County.

Wednesday, February 28, 2007

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Be prepared for heated discussions



Photos by CHRISTOPHER TUFFLEY/News-Sun
Lake Placid High School assistant baseball coach Kevin Tunning has been eager to teach teen leadership for years, ever since he attended a workshop on the subject. He had come back to school and put his name on a waiting list that only began with him. The reality has measured up to the dream he said. Even the most jaded of his 14-year-olds are coming around to the approach.

Christopher Tuffley
Staff writer

Sunday, October 1, 2006

SEBRING - The School Board of Highlands County has invested a great deal of money, effort and time into a program it calls Freshman Foundations.

Designed to help ninth graders make a smooth adjustment to high school, it focuses on preparing adolescents for an adulthood based on lifelong learning.

All three high schools have versions of the same program, but the classroom syllabus, a curriculum developed by the Flippen Group, an educational think tank which developed the Capture Children's Hearts program, is identical school to school.

All teen leadership teachers were sent to a special training session and permanent positions in support of the program were added to each high school's faculty.

Freshman Foundations is designed to promote a better bond between teacher and student, promoting an atmosphere of trust and personal possibility.

Studies have shown, local administrators say, that there is a correlation between a school's trust level and its student's academic achievement.

Current thinking in educational circles is that students learn best in an environment of positive relationships, relevance and rigor, but the relationship between student and teacher is the basis for everything else.

Students who trust their teachers, in other words, are more likely to believe in the relevance of their work, and are more willing to take on more difficult work.

The Flippen Group has prepared a detailed curriculum for its Teen Leadership course, which takes nine weeks.

Lessons built around role playing, writing and public speaking (public speaking provides the bulk of graded material) help teens develop the habit of thinking things through and accounting for possible consequences. Conflict resolution plays an important part in the program, as does goal setting and establishing

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productive study habits.

Positive affirmations are exchanged between students, and students and teachers regularly, and students and teachers custom create social contracts for each class.

Self control and discipline are conscious goals. Teachers use a four question system to help students learn how to focus. Each questions requires a precise answer.

Question: What are you doing?

Student answer: Talking.

Question: What are you supposed to be doing?

Student answer: Paying attention.

Question: Are you doing it?

Student answer: No.

Question: What are you going to do about it?

Student answer: I'll pay attention.

While some teachers worry that the course content might be too simple and lacking in rigor, those teachers who guide teen leadership classes, say the students are becoming engaged and more interested in the conundrums the course brings to light.

"We help the kids learn how to make principal based decisions, and not act out on their feelings," Kevin Tunning said. He teaches English and two sections of the leadership course at **Lake Placid High School**. "We're trying to train a generation of leadership. The top students thought it wasn't necessary at first, but they've begun to change their minds.

"One of my students surprised himself. He was so opposed to speaking in public, he was prepared to take a zero the first time he had to get up to speak. But then, at the last minute, he changed his mind and spoke out."

Individuals who are thinking about teaching as a career need to decide for themselves what kind of a teacher they will be. Different levels of education use different styles. Individuals who are thinking about working with adolescents should be comfortable with some messiness and noise and be prepared to do more listening than speaking.

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2227 U.S. Hwy 27 South, Sebring FL 33870
Phone: (863) 385-6155 • Fax: (863) 385-1954
Circulation: (863) 385-6155 ext. 513

HarborPoint Network: [The Daily Commercial](#) - [The South Lake Press](#) - [The Sebring News Sun](#) - [Washington Jewish Week](#)

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