Virtual school lets school offer more honors classes

By: David Broyles Staff Reporter
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Students remember concentrating on staying in the lines while coloring. Mount Airy High School is thinking outside of the lines in collaboration with the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics to provide a variety of advanced classes normally out of reach for a small school.

The Durham-based school was founded by former North Carolina Gov. James B. Hunt Jr., former governor, senator and Duke University President Terry Sanford, and academician and author John Ehle. The school opened in 1980 as the first school of its kind, a public, residential high school where students study a specialized curriculum emphasizing science and mathematics.

NCSSM has since become the model for 18 similar schools around the globe and has helped found the National Consortium for Specialized Secondary Schools of Mathematics, Science and Technology (NCSSSMST), which now counts more than 100 member institutions across the country.

MAHS Principal Dr. Sandy George explained technology made the partnership possible for Mount Airy students who use the internet for the virtual classes offered by qualified professors.

“Seven schools have become connected across the state for this,” said George. “The classes are interactive our students can see the professors and the professors can see them.” Jon Cawley serves as the moderator for the classes. She said typically, 1A schools’ numbers limit class offerings.

“We recognize the importance of Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics to our students’ futures,” said George. “At a 1A high school, I have to justify my course offerings by numbers of students and the qualifications of teachers. We had to think outside of the box for a solution.”

The partnership seemed to answer those needs for advanced level, honors courses. She said the school prides itself on how well it competes with other, larger schools.

“We offer 11 AP classes and that’s big for a school our size,” George said. “We have to be creative in doing this, sometimes offering some classes every other year. We want our students to stretch themselves. We’ve found that when you have high expectations students rise to them and surpass what they thought they were capable of. We don’t want to have a ceiling on their education.”

She said a total of 64 students are enrolled in the program which offers courses including honors forensic science, AP environmental science, AP stats,
honors genetics and biotechnology, honors aerospace and engineering and honors forensic science anthropology.

The school also has revamped its counselor position with Frank Mayberry acting as a career development coordinator. George said Mayberry’s business knowledge and connections help him better advise them on how to make the classroom align with their career choices.

“Let’s face it. Not everyone goes to a four-year university,” George said. “Many of our students go to a two-year school for a certificate and a well paying job. It’s our duty to get them the information and opportunity so they can do that. You have to be open minded. Education is always evolving. We need to change to meet the needs of students. We cannot stay the same.”

Sophomore Jack McCluskey had just finished introducing himself during a NCSSM forensic science class. He said he was looking forward to understanding a lot of the crime scene science seen on television or movies.

“This is different, but it opens up a lot of doors for classes for us,” said McCluskey. “The small class lets us focus.”

Classmate Elizabeth Overfelt is in the class because she wants to be a forensic anthropologist. She said the class was “perfect” for what she wants to do for a career, and that having to decide a career early was frightening for her but she needs to know if she will be good in this type of science.

“I want to do this,” said Overfelt. “It’s only the third day of class and it’s kind of weird not being face to face with the teacher, but she’s making us feel comfortable.”

Reach David Broyles at dbroyles@civitasmedia.com or 719-1952.


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