Tuscaloosa County Schools program will challenge high achievers

Academic Scholars Program will offer more rigorous classes to above-average sixth-graders

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Published: Sunday, March 23, 2014 at 3:00 p.m.

Starting in August, the Tuscaloosa County School System will offer more academically rigorous classes to high-achieving sixth-graders as part of its new Academic Scholars Program.

Superintendent Elizabeth Swinford said the purpose of the program — which was unanimously approved by the board — is to provide a framework of learning for middle school students that encourages them to become creative, critical and reflective thinkers.

She said the implementation of the program is part of the system’s mission to educate and empower all students to become college- and career-ready graduates.

“The reason why we saw the need for it was from various sources,” Swinford said. “No. 1, after being out in the community with our community forums, several things came up. People wanted more options for kids, including options for kids who are gifted, but not exclusively gifted. In other words, above-average kids.

“We thought, ‘You know what, you’re right.’ We have a lot of things for at-risk students, but not a lot for gifted students. We also have this push for career technical education, but a segment of students were left out. So we created this for students who are gifted and above average. This is also for students who work hard and do well.”

Tuscaloosa County Board of Education member Joe Boteler said this is the kind of program that the board hoped would be put in place when they hired Swinford last April.

“Once again, we’re trying to push those gifted students,” Boteler said. “By push, I mean challenge them. We want to make sure that they are taking courses that require them to think and to learn. That’s the basis behind this. A lot of this will be a hands-on process that is designed to make them think and reason.

“This is definitely a good thing. In my mind, one of the main reasons we hired Dr. Swinford was to provide the leadership where our students are excelling. We’re not going to accept mediocrity, we’re looking for excellence.”

Swinford said if they’re going to increase the number of students taking advanced placement, honors and dual-enrollment classes in high school, they need to provide students with more challenging classes starting in middle school. That way students

will be prepared for advanced classes when they get to high school.

“That’s why we’re starting this in sixth-grade,” she said. “Research shows that academics drop in middle school so we’re trying to do something to help them maintain their performance in middle school. There’s a lot of pieces in this academy. It’s filling a void in the area of gifting, the area of high achievement and helping the drop in test scores that occur in middle school.”

The program will offer core classes — science, math, reading and social studies — taught with hands-on, project-based learning techniques that will minimize the teacher’s delivery of instruction and increase the students learning and understanding of a concept through the process of discovery, which Swinford said increases students problem solving and critical thinking skills.

“Our approach will be more towards the STEAM (Science Technology Engineering Art Mathematics) curriculum,” she said. “Art will be integrated into everything.”

Students in the program will have to be independent learners and independent thinkers, but they’ll also have to be able to work well in a group, Swinford said.

Technology will be heavily used in the program and students will likely be able to take home school-assigned laptops.

The program will to be taught in separate classes outside of where other students are being taught.

To enter the program, students in sixth-grade will have to have a B average or higher. Students who qualify for gifted services will automatically be eligible for the Academic Scholars Program.

Though the program is initially only for sixth-graders, it will expand to seventh-grade in spring 2015 and to eighth-grade in spring 2016.

“We’ll have meetings throughout the community probably at the end of April and May to explain it to parents so they can see if they want their kids to participate,” Swinford said.

Teachers will be trained to teach the more rigorous curriculum this summer and during the school year.

Swinford said she doesn’t know the cost of the program yet, but will know once they’ve worked out all of the details.

“It will be an exciting option for kids and I think they’re going to love it.”

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