Middle-schoolers rack up high school credits

WESLEY CHAPEL — As early as fourth grade, Kaitlyn Jenkins’ teacher noticed that math bored her, not because the girl found the subject dull but because working the problems proved too easy.

Kaitlyn clearly needed more advanced material, so the teacher moved her to higher-level math.

By fifth grade, Kaitlyn was leaving the Wesley Chapel Elementary campus each day to take a sixth-grade math class at Dr. John Long Middle School.

Now as an eighth-grader, Kaitlyn is continuing that pace, taking a geometry class that will count as a high school credit and help make it possible for her to graduate early if she chooses.

“That’s the plan,” said 13-year-old Kaitlyn, whose dream is to attend Princeton University.

More and more middle school students are taking high-school level classes that help them rack up credits early while providing an academic challenge that they and their parents embrace.

At a summer workshop, the Pasco County School Board learned that in 2009, middle-school students countywide earned 3,257 high school credits.

By 2013, that had jumped to 5,849 credits.

“We anticipate that’s going to grow even more,” said Darrell Huling, a curriculum supervisor for the district.

Several factors account for the growth.

The state Legislature in 2012 passed a law that required schools to create options for accelerated instruction to eligible students in kindergarten through 12th grade.
Also, the availability of online instruction, such as the classes offered by Pasco eSchool and Florida Virtual School, has provided additional opportunities for students.

Long Middle Principal Christine Wolff, who has witnessed the trend at her school, believes the school also does a better job of identifying students who would benefit from advanced learning.

“We push rigor,” Wolff said. “There are definitely kids who are ready to be more challenged. It shouldn’t be a one-size fits all.”

The high-school level courses at Long Middle include Algebra I, Spanish I and geometry. This is the second year the school has offered geometry on its campus.

Before that, students would spend one class period at nearby Wiregrass Ranch High School to earn the credit. Some still do that to take Algebra II.

“When we can provide a wider array of options, kids will push themselves more,” Wolff said.

The risk is that a student could be unprepared for the expectations of a higher-level class, but the state tempers that risk somewhat.

Middle-school students who end up with a C, D or F in one of the high school classes can retake the class later and replace the grade.

Wolff said there’s also an effort to screen students and provide advice ahead of time.

That way, students unprepared to face the tougher classwork are less likely to end up in one of those classes.

Students who pocket high school credits early aren’t lacking for ways to fill out their class schedules once they reach high school.
Wolff said those students have numerous options, such as Advanced Placement classes or dual enrollment college courses.

One challenge middle schools face is making sure teachers are properly certified for the high school courses, Wolff said.

Wolff said even the advanced students still manage to have a middle-school experience.

Many students, like Kaitlyn, hope this head start will help them finish high school without putting in a full four years.

Tyler Rampersaud, 12, an eighth-grader, said he would consider early graduation.

But he may enter the International Baccalaureate program and would be a four-year high school student if he does.

He took Algebra I in seventh grade and is enrolled in geometry this year.

He is unfazed by the rigor.

“It’s going well,” he said. “It’s actually very fun.”

Although some credit-collecting middle-school students graduate high school early, most opt to stick around because they don’t want to miss out on their senior year, said Vanessa Hilton, director of the district’s Office for Teaching and Learning.

Kaitlyn is unconcerned about that.
“You get to go to prom as a junior,” she said.

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