

High-tech high school gets OK

BUSINESS: New charter school designed to prepare students for the workplace.

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The Anchorage School Board on Monday unanimously approved a new charter school where students will wield Palm Pilots, work in cubicles and wear business-casual clothes. Highland Tech High is the district's fifth charter school. The board approved the fourth, Frontier Charter School, at a meeting two weeks ago. About 1,000 students currently attend the other three.

Highland will open in September. Organizers said it should enroll about 300 students in grades seven through 10 in its first year. Grades 11 and 12 will be added in the following two years, with an eventual goal of having 450 kids.

"We're not going to have just the high-end kids or just the computer geeks," said CJ Steigele, who will be Highland's principal and chief executive officer.

"I seriously want the kids who are falling through cracks in regular schools. I want the kids who are bored in school, because they'll shine in a place like this."

Highland students will study basic subjects and must pass state-required tests in reading, writing and math to get diplomas.

But the school's design otherwise veers from the norm.

With a heavy emphasis on computers and science, students will complete required internships, job shadows and community service projects. Their curriculum includes studying communication, careers and personal, social and service skills.

Highland's structure will also be unique. It's a standards-based school, which means it won't have the traditional grade levels, with promotions to the next grade at the end of each year. Instead, students will work at a level commensurate with their ability. They advance to the next step at their own pace, once they master certain skills.

When Highland students graduate, they will be ready for the workplace or college, said Steigele, a former teacher who has worked as principal of a charter school before. She started planning Highland back in 2000, working from comments from local business people.

"They want kids to come out of high school prepared to come to work," Steigele said. "They want students to know how to answer the phones, have good customer service skills and know how to shake a hand. These kids are going to have these skills."

District high schools have been criticized for not preparing students for the working world, Superintendent Carol Comeau said.

Highland "will fill a hole we have in our district right now," Comeau said. "It builds in a component of community service, working in the community. I think this school will be a very strong, strong program."

The school plans eventually to employ about 21 teachers, plus the principal, an assistant principal, a counselor and various other staffers.

A typical school day will run from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., approximating the business world's typical schedule. Students will divide time between the classroom and workplaces, where they'll go on field trips and do internships. Noon lunches will unfold in round-table fashion as guest speakers discuss career opportunities.

Computers will infuse everything. Teachers will zap homework assignments directly to students' Palm Pilots or similar hand-held computers. By graduation, students will have mastered beginning-level computer programming skills.

Throughout, students will look professional, Steigele said.

"This doesn't mean suit and tie," Steigele said. "It does mean dress slacks or dress jeans. If they're going out to the community, they'll need to wear dresses, skirts, slacks -- so they look like they're able to go into the professional world. There's definitely not going to be bare midriffs."

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