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Educational incentives

► The folks at Delaware Valley High School realize that it's tough for some kids to do well in school, so they provide some extra incentive.

JENNY SWIGODA / TIMES PHOTO
Delaware Valley High School student Nick Phares with his new laptop, which he was awarded for his academic achievements over the past school year.

By Tom Waring
Times Staff Writer

The folks at Delaware Valley High School in Somerton like to say that, "We are alternative education."

The school, located at 13550 Bustleton Ave. (at Petoni Place), has been in existence for 37 years. At one time, it was a private school where parents paid tuition.

Today, the school educates about 180 ninth- to 12th-grade boys and girls from Philadelphia and Bucks and Montgomery counties.

Parents can still pay tuition to send their child to the school, but most of the students are "at-risk," in need of behavioral, emotional, academic and/or special education services. Many have struggled at past schools because of unexcused absences, poor grades and disciplinary problems.

The interior and exterior of the school are tiny, but large enough to offer a small class size, personal attention and extensive guidance for all students.

This year, school president David Shulick instituted a Truancy Prevention Program to reward students who have stellar attendance records. The students, along with their parents, won gift cards for coming to school and arriving on time.

Nick Phares took the program seriously. The 16-year-old from Crispin Gardens had perfect attendance all year and was never late. In fact, he was usually early.

In addition, he maintained a 3.3 grade-point average and didn't have any behavioral incidents.

For his efforts, Phares won an Acer laptop computer. Last week, DVHS director and chief academic officer Mattie Thompson presented the teenager with the computer.

HE DID THE BARE ESSENTIALS

Phares said he followed a simple formula this academic year.

"I went to school and did my work," he said.

Delaware Valley High School officials say their model is working so well that they will open a Bucks County campus during the 2007-08 academic year. At some point in the future, sites will open in Montgomery and Delaware counties.

Thompson said the school conducts intake interviews with students and their parents, then develops an individualized learning plan.

Staff tries to develop a rapport with the students to make them feel important and ease their transition. For many students from rough neighborhoods and troubled homes, the building is a safe haven.

Academically, Thompson said, the school tries to make students "challenged, but not frustrated."

In the case of Phares, Thompson found a smart, quiet teen who respected his teachers and fellow students and didn't use any foul language.

"He was a positive role model to other students," she said.

Added social support coordinator Tarah Doyle: "Since September, he was always focused on academics."

Classes run from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at DVHS, with time for a break, a study period and a short lunch. The year is divided into two semesters.

Phares woke up on his own every day, Kathy Kelly, the boy's mom, drove him to school most days.

The student took classes in world history, English, algebra, biology, chemistry and music theory. His favorite subject is English. He excelled in all subjects, though algebra

gave him a little trouble

CONCENTRATED ENVIRONMENT

Phares said he did well, in part, because there are fewer distractions at DVHS as opposed to a large public high school. Paying attention was easier because he didn't have neighborhood friends to take his mind off his work.

"The classrooms are smaller, and the day is not as long," he said.

Kelly said her son, who attended public schools before arriving at DVHS, has made great progress.

"He's learned a lot more at Delaware Valley," she said. "I've seen him do more homework than at other schools. I'm very proud of him. He did really well this year and earned the laptop."

Phares said the environment at DVHS is conducive to academic achievement.

"Most people who go here do their work," he said. "It's a different atmosphere. The teachers get you to understand what they're talking about."

Besides working hard in the classroom, Phares puts in 35 to 40 hours a week at Wawa. He's eager to use his new laptop to play games, surf the Internet and send e-mail and instant messages to his friends. He no longer has to share the family desktop computer with his two brothers.

In September, he'll begin his junior year of high school and is looking forward to graduation in 2009. He might go to college or, more likely, a trade school.

"I eventually want to get in the union to be an electrician," he said. "That seems like an interesting job." ••

For more information about Delaware Valley High School, visit www.dvhs.org