



ACE students spend first day ‘on the job’

The architecture, construction and engineering charter school welcomed its first class last week

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BY LIBBY TUCKER

Kids throughout the Portland metro area headed back to school last week. But for some high school students attending the new Architecture Construction and Engineering Academy, the first day of school was more like the first day on the job.

No bells ring between classes and the hallways are empty of lockers in Portland's newest public charter school. The academy, based in the Willamette Carpenters training center on Northeast 158th Street, operates more like a job site than a school, with the entire student body working together to complete projects.

"In Gresham we go class to class and we're usually just sitting there," said Petr Lebedov, a junior at Gresham High School who attended his first day at the ACE Academy on Thursday. "Here, it's hands-on."

In its first year, ACE has enrolled 142 juniors and seniors from Parkrose, Centennial, Gresham-Barlow, and Reynolds high schools in east Portland. Students split their time between campuses, alternating days between their home school and the academy, to mix traditional coursework with classes at the charter school.

On their first day at ACE last week, students were assigned to an "anchor" class, similar to home room, where they report to one teacher to learn the fundamentals of each of the building disciplines. Each anchor class operates like a construction crew with teachers as the foremen.

"We're trying to put a lot of responsibility back on them," said Marjan Rotting, who teaches building science and computer-assisted design at ACE. "When they call each other derogatory names, for example, I tell them, 'On a job site, that's enough for me to fire you.'"

Lessons emphasize teamwork and problem-solving, and the students' first task of the day on Thursday was to design a program for cleaning the cafeteria after lunch. Anchors develop their own rules and the consequences for breaking them, said Rotting.

Students in Rotting's anchor class, for example, decided that kids who are caught slacking off in their responsibilities get one warning before they lose their iPod or cell phone for the day. A third offense requires 25 push-ups, and kids lose their field trip privileges if they get a fourth warning.

"They were much stricter with each other than I would have been," said Rotting.

The first day was also a chance to introduce students to each other, orient them to the building and set ground rules. Anchor classes toured the building with a blank floor plan in hand, filling in the details, noting the off-limits areas and stopping to watch construction progress on an addition to the academy building.

ACE is expanding within the Willamette Carpenters Training Center to add seven new classrooms, a meeting space and a cafeteria, bringing the school's capacity to 500 students over the next decade. General contractor BJ Cummings is scheduled to complete work by January.

"Dude, that's awesome," said Nathan Tudor, an ACE student in instructor Erin Butler's anchor class, as he watched an operator swing a forklift around. He can't wait to learn how to use the equipment, he said.

But the highlight of the day for students was receiving their laptops – every student gets one – to set up their email address and learn how to turn in written assignments. The Mt. Hood Cable Regulatory Commission granted the school \$200,000 to buy laptops for the students, install wireless Internet access and build an engineering lab on its campus.

"Overall it went pretty well," said Mike Taylor, director of ACE Academy. "Like any first day of the first year, when every teacher is

brand new, there were some issues.”

Some students missed their buses. Some buses couldn't keep their schedules. And some students showed up on the wrong day, he said.

“Most kids are eager to get started,” said Taylor. “There's a level of excitement here among students and staff I haven't seen before.”

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