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Editorials

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## Eisenhower leads way to build a better high school

*By the H&R Editorial Staff*

The leaders at Eisenhower High School deserve some credit for trying to solve its problems by making a major change in the way the school operates.

Faced with declining test scores, truancy and other problems, the school has decided it will change into a system similar to the true middle school concept and also use teaching and learning techniques that have proven successful with gifted and talented students.

School administrators, teachers, students and parents have developed a vision statement that says Eisenhower "is a community in which academic excellence for all students is accomplished through mutual respect and a commitment to learning."

While Eisenhower has many excellent students, it's fair to say not all students have achieved "academic excellence" under the current system. In 2001, 44.9 percent of the juniors taking the Prairie State Achievement Examination met or exceeded the state's learning goals. That number has slipped to 37.5 percent in 2004. At the same time, the state average has remained constant at 55 percent.

Eisenhower is going to attack this problem with a series of "learning communities" that will allow students to take advantage of the course offerings available in a large high school while receiving the individual attention smaller schools offer.

Students, teachers, parents and administrators will spend this summer planning the "learning community" programs, which will begin with the 2006 school year. In a true middle school, students are placed in "communities" or "teams" that offer more individualized support.

The "learning communities" ideal also will work within the framework of Accelerated Schools PLUS - Powerful Learning Unlimited Success. These teaching strategies that were previously used for gifted students include making learning inclusive, authentic, interactive, continuous and learner-centered. The transformation process involves 17 students, 23 parents and the school's 80 certified teachers.

We're encouraged that the group already had made two important decisions. First, they've decided the focus should be on improving academics. High schools serve all sorts of social purposes in our society, and those are important. But the primary mission is to educate students to the highest level possible. It's good to see that recognized.

We'd also congratulate the group for deciding to try something different, and we'd encourage them to continue to think in radical terms. The current U.S. high school system doesn't work at all for some students and works only tolerably well for most students. To receive dramatic improvement, schools are going to need to embrace dramatic change.

Change is difficult, and we're sure the Eisenhower switch to "learning communities" will have its rough spots and its detractors. But if the change in systems results in better academic performance, the students and community will be better served.