

Lighthouse Academy gains charter status and relocates

Excerpts from an article written by Herb Woerpel for The Cadance, August 20, 2008

An academy designed to give troubled seventh- to 10th grade students a fresh start is getting a fresh start as well. Lighthouse Academy, called the area's first "street school," is starting out the new school year in new facilities at 36th Street in Kentwood under charter designation granted by Ferris State University.

The academy, which opened in January 2005 on Eastern Avenue, is preparing to open the doors to its new 3330 36th St. campus for the start of the school year on Monday, Aug. 25.

The school is dedicated to the success of expelled students, students referred by the court, or special-education students, said Heidi Cate, Lighthouse Academy principal and superintendent. "These students tend to come in with troubles and we don't have them check their troubles at the door," Cate said. "We have counseling, social workers, and psychiatric services on site, so it is a real attractive option for school districts to refer students. It is difficult for schools to provide those services and for parents to coordinate all that. With the educational service and the other options under one roof, the program is very beneficial."

School officials said the new facility will provide many more amenities, allow them to possibly triple their enrollment. "We've had to cap our enrollment at about 50 to 70 students, while the new facility will allow us to serve up to 220 students," Cate said. "Additionally, we will have our own gym, a creative arts area, a sensory integration program, and space for after-school programs."

After operating as an alternative program for the last several years, Lighthouse Academy was granted the charter status through Ferris State. The charter status gives the school many more funding options as they will now receive money directly from the Michigan Department of Education rather than the Kent Intermediate School District.

The charter status also offers the school many more options for expansion and the ability to grant credit and diplomas to students who complete course work, said Cate. "In the past students could only be reinstated back to their schools, but now as a charter school, we can grant them credit for their work," Cate said. "They can stay beyond their expulsion or court involvement and can now graduate from our program."

That is really important for our students."

Since its inception, Lighthouse officials said their teacher-to student ratio, as well as their individualized care, has allowed them to provide individualized attention to each student, without having to expel any student from the program. "We pride ourselves on many different ways to catch the kids with different nets and have not had a kid yet that we have asked to leave the program," Cate said.

"We've had kids who have struggled and we've stepped up their individualized work and care, but it wouldn't make any sense for the expelled school to expel students.

"Generally we start to see kids open the window of trust and engage with us typically in their first marking period. We plan as a staff on how to create an environment that feels safe, welcoming, and a place where kids want to come early and don't want to leave after school."

For more information, call (616) 949-2287.