



Principal Tom Wagner

Avenue Scholars see ‘potential for bright future’

“It’s been a heckuva ride,” says Tom Wagner, now in his second year as Omaha Benson High School principal.

Wagner has served in many roles during his 24 years with Omaha Public Schools: French teacher, Norris Middle School, five years; Assistant Principal, Norris Middle School, three years; Omaha South Assistant Principal, five years; Teacher Administrative Center, district office, three years; Omaha Central, five and a half years.

Wagner feels “really good” about everything going on at Omaha Benson, despite facing the challenges of hosting a high number of students who are experiencing tremendous “real-life struggles.” Twenty percent of students are enrolled in special education, 20% are enrolled in ESL (English as a Second Language) made “in large part of refugees,” and nearly 90% of students are on free/reduced lunch.

“I feel really good about our staff that is ready to receive kids where they’re at and then push them from there,” Wagner said. “Our staff is very cognizant of those struggles.”

Wagner admits he is still learning about the role Avenue Scholars Foundation plays in the services Benson provides to students. However, he has already seen the positive impact on Benson Scholars.

“I see Jason Boyd (the High School Career Coach at Benson) with our kids, how he interacts with them and how they interact with him,” Wagner said. “I see that they are going to classes at Metro in the afternoon. They get that experience of being on a campus and seeing ‘hey, maybe this is possible.’”



Wagner believes it’s a program that emphasizes showing students their potential for a achieving a bright future, regardless of their circumstances.

“So many of our students don’t think something like this [a good job, or college] is in the cards for them,” he said. “It allows them to change their perception, their mindset, of what college is. Even if they decide not to go for a year or two, they know ‘yes, I can do this.’”

Wagner sees the coaches being keys to the program’s success.

“So much of it is those coaches,” he said. “They are so key and critical. I tell freshmen, you’re in charge of your education. Now, what are you going to do with it? Those coaches, like Jason, they reinforce that.”

Seniors prep for college experience

The Seniors started the semester by enrolling in Human Relations 1010, a dual enrollment course through Metropolitan Community College. In this class students are earning credits in both their home high school and at MCC, which will allow them to gain early credits towards their Associates Degree.

The content of this course allows students opportunities to learn about a variety of human behavior topics related to improving personal, job, and career effectiveness, including but not limited to stress management, goal setting, ethics and diversity in the workplace, and preparing for a professional interview. Through this experience, students are gaining exposure to the demands and expectations of a college class while still in the comfort of their home school with their Career Coach as their instructor.

In addition to their Human Relations course, students have also recently

prepared for and taken the placement exam, the Accuplacer, at MCC. The results of this test determine the level of English, Math, and, if necessary, Reading, students will be placed in when they begin taking classes on MCC's campus, possibly as soon as next semester for some students. In addition, the information helped students to begin plotting out their class progression in college.

Meanwhile, outside of both of these experiences, the Seniors are working diligently on their grades, attendance, work ready skills and behavior to ensure they are eligible to attend Senior Academy and/or participate in another approved Senior Experience next semester. They are also working to remain excellent candidates for the Avenue Horatio Alger Career Scholarship, which will be awarded this spring to active Avenue Scholars who are in good standing with the program.

Juniors plan for college and careers

The juniors are busy exploring their strengths so they can make informed decisions about their career choices. The students are working through career-readiness curriculum to help them learn about how to obtain a job and show up to show up to the job with the skills to be successful. Career coaches are working with students to write a resume and cover letter, and they are practicing interview skills.

During the first semester, students also focus on their transferring skills as students in a work setting as well as the classroom. Career coaches work with students on how to improve their academic skills to ensure they are ready for Metropolitan Community College courses.

Juniors take an in-depth look at the high-demand career areas in Omaha: Medical Sciences, Business, Trades and Manufacturing, Industrial Technology, and Automotive Technology. Students recently attended a Career Exploration Day at Metro's Fort Campus. During this day they were able to explore each

industry area. Businesses graciously took time out of their schedules to teach students about entry-level positions within their industry areas and career advancement opportunities within the industry.

Businesses provided hands-on activities for the students to get the feel of what a career would be like within that industry. Highlights of the day included repairing a car bumper at CARSTAR, driving a truck simulator with Werner Trucking, practicing basic welding techniques with Drake Williams Steel, and experiencing a 3D printed engine replica created by prototype students at MCC. Students left the event with more clarity about what they want to pursue in the future.

Juniors Career Coaches will teach students about the career plan. Both student and coach will create a plan together, including proper steps to achieve their goal. This career planning process will continue beyond the high school program into their education and training at MCC.

UPDATE

Avenue Scholars is well into its ninth year of existence in Omaha Public Schools. With 46 active Juniors and Seniors this year, the Avenue Scholars program is growing and thriving at Omaha Benson High School.

This year's students have already proven themselves to be an excellent group of hard working, committed students. Many Scholars brought with them a wealth of part-time job experience, and several others have worked to secure employment this fall. Our goal is that ALL students have at least 150 hours of work experience by graduation, as we know this is the best way for students to gain work-ready skills.

In the classroom, the Juniors have learned about their individual Gallup Strengths, prepared for and attended the one-day Career Exploration Event, and have researched their careers of interest. We'll round out the semester by discussing the best ways to prepare for a professional interview, including drafting a resume, and developing thorough answers to interview questions.

The Seniors have been enrolled in my section of Human Relations 1010 at BHS. They've transitioned to following a syllabus and rising to the demands a college class, including reading from their textbook on a regular basis, maintaining strong attendance and moving through material at a more intense pace than we did last year. It's been an adjustment for them to see me as their college Instructor, but most students are moving in the right direction, and I'm hopeful they'll be ready to take classes on campus from other MCC Instructors this spring.

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