

Reading, writing, rapping : stressed at Plaza Academy

By DAN MARGOLIES

Tucked inconspicuously into the third floor of a church annex on East 46th Street near the Country Club Plaza is one of Kansas City's more exclusive high schools.

It has only 50 students. Tuition runs more than \$3,000 a year. About two-thirds of its graduates go on to college or junior college.

The Plaza Academy, however, is no Ivy League prep school, although Holden Caulfield would have felt right at home here. The school is a last refuge for high school students who have dropped out, been kicked out, or fallen through the cracks of more conventional academic settings.

Conventional this school is not. The rules are simple: attend your classes, get your work done, turn in your assignments on time. In return, the school says, we'll treat you like an adult and give you the freedom to do pretty much as you please.

"We like to think we're a college for high school students," says headmaster Gary Seabaugh.

"Freedom" is the byword here . . . freedom combined with measured doses of academic discipline.

A recent school day started with Seabaugh addressing the students in the nondescript lounge that passes for an assembly room. More a bull session than a formal assembly, it's a chance to air grievances, ask questions and speak one's mind.

Seabaugh, playing the role of benign but firm father figure, tells them:

"If there are no cigarette butts on the floor, I'll bring up the audio-visual equipment. But I'd really like you to get those butts off the floor."

Not, mind you, "don't smoke," although Seabaugh frowns on the habit and tries to discourage it. Just pick up the butts.

In behavioral terms it's called operant conditioning. Reward desirable behavior, punish bad. Is the student chronically late for school? Take away his car keys and make him take the bus. Is he spending his allowance in the head shop across the street? Dole it out piecemeal.

Seabaugh's background is in developmental psychology, and given half the chance, he'll overwhelm you with a stream of statistically laden jargon explaining the school's approach.



Doug Hamer photo

Gary Seabaugh, headmaster of Plaza Academy, encourages freedom at the school.

But what all the talk about "baselines" and "standard deviations" boils down to is simply stated:

"A restrictive traditional environment elicits rebellious, resistant responses," Seabaugh says. "We try to approximate the adult world here."

The results speak for themselves. Despite having to shell out a considerable boodle for tuition, parents say it's worth it.

"My son was the original troublemaker" said one parent, whose son got booted out of two private high schools before ending up at The Plaza Academy. "What they (The Plaza Academy) did was an absolute miracle . . . Seabaugh turned the kid around academically."

Said another parent: "My son had problems with motivation . . . Now I see a child who is motivated, who is learning, who thinks better of himself. How they did it I don't know, but whatever it is, they've been able to reach his 'on' button."

Ask the students what they like about the school and they invariably say, "freedom." "It's better than public school, because people aren't yelling at you all the time," says Amy, 15.

Much of the credit for the school's success goes to Seabaugh, 38, the driving dynamo behind the school's revival. The school, which was founded in 1974, was faltering financially when Seabaugh took it over seven years ago. "There were eight students, no furniture, no books, no nothing," he says.

Now there are 50 students — a number Seabaugh estimates will grow to 70 before the semester is out — and an annual budget of between \$160,000 and \$200,000.

Seabaugh, an ex-Marine, graduated from Shawnee Mission East High School and holds undergraduate degrees from Johnson County Community College and the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He has a master's degree in education from UMKC and currently is working toward a doctorate at the University of Kansas in developmental and child psychology.

The appearance of uninterrupted academic achievement is somewhat deceptive, though. He joined the Navy after what he admits were two mediocre years in junior college and later transferred to the Marines as a hospital corpsman.

He was shipped to Vietnam in 1968, just in time for the Tet offensive. Wounded four times, Seabaugh returned home depressed, distraught and 57 pounds lighter.

After a stint at Great Lakes Naval Hospital in Chicago, Seabaugh went back to college. It was at UMKC that he got interested in developmental psychology, which ultimately led him to the renowned Department of Human Development and Family Life at KU.

He ended up at The Plaza Academy by responding to an ad seeking an administrator for the school. Seabaugh says he saw the school as a lab for his pedagogical ideas, which combine a tough minded, no-nonsense attitude with a highly individualized approach toward each student.

“Certainly we don't have a rap-across-

the-knuckles approach,” he says. “What we try to do is be aware of individual differences.”

That awareness begins with the preparation for each student of an Individual Education Profile — a written report of a student's test results, academic strengths and weaknesses, observations on study habits and classroom demeanor, and a recommended course of study.

It continues with daily one-on-one meetings with the academy's four full-time teachers and part-time student instructors, and extends to counseling sessions — sometimes as often as weekly — with family members.

The curriculum emphasizes basic skills: English, math, science, social studies, history. Classes are conducted around a table and usually number no more than 10 students. Progress is charted through daily grade cards.

Between classes, which are staggered so that some students are in class while others are out, students are free to come and go as they please. Midday usually finds them studying on their own, alone or in small clusters. Surprisingly, for some of these students have a history of what is euphemistically called anti-social behavior, an easy camaraderie seems to prevail.

The school occupies somewhat ramshackle quarters in the annex of the Community Christian Church. Occasionally, there is talk of moving to a fancier location, but amid the day-to-day hurley-burley, it's hard to think that far ahead, says Seabaugh, dashing off to teach his two o'clock karate class.