

# QuEd up for Education

*People and programs impacting our QCSD community*

## QCSD set to unveil learning center



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**Dr. Lisa Hoffman,**  
Assistant Superintendent



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**Greg Leshner,**  
Principal of Record



**Bold colors, flexible seating highlight Academy classrooms.**

**By Gary Weckselblatt**

**T**he Quakertown Community School District has developed a new school for students who might have slipped through the cracks in a traditional educational setting. District officials believe *The Academy at Quakertown* will provide a transformative learning environment for students with a wide range of needs. It is scheduled to open on September 4th.

The students' initial lessons are conducted in a cyber format. Anyone needing additional help will be instructed by *Academy* staff members.

Students may include those challenged by their previous school's surroundings, with truancy, emotional difficulties

or behavioral issues, including drug and alcohol concerns. It is not necessarily about their ability to keep up academically, as several students will be taking Advanced Placement and honors courses, in addition to world languages.

"There are a number of students in the district who need a smaller environment to be successful," said Greg Leshner, *The Academy's* principal of record. "We believe that we'll be able to provide a structure with low student-teacher ratios and a number of consistent, personalized services that will meet the needs of our students."

Assistant Superintendent Dr. Lisa Hoffman, who focused on alternative education for disruptive youth in her doc-

toral dissertation, was a key proponent and developer of *The Academy*. "This is for different types of learners, and we're going to use different strategies to help them reconnect with school," she said. "This isn't a place that a student will come to and be forgotten. It's not a negative. It's not punitive."

*The Academy* expects to have approximately 25 students start the school year in grades 8 to 12. Four of the students who had been outsourced to other educational venues are returning, saving the district between \$50,000 and \$100,000 that it previously paid other agencies for educational services. Once *The Academy* is up and

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Facilities Director Kelly Harper, right, said the maintenance team of, from left, Gus Granger, Tony Henry, Jon Kingcade, Rob Christine and Todd Pearson repurposed the building in about eight weeks. At right is the area that will be used by *The Academy's* counselor.

## THE ACADEMY

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running, the potential exists for QCSD to accept students from other districts, which would generate revenue.

Several factors came together in the spring for the district to move forward with plans for *The Academy*. First, its contract with Ombudsman Educational Services was ending, and school officials believed they could produce better results for these at-risk students. In addition, several educators were going to be furloughed because of shrinking student enrollment. By starting *The Academy*, those furloughs were prevented.

"It has been on the radar for awhile, but this was the perfect storm," Hoffman said.

Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner credited his cabinet's brainstorming for the inspiration and development of *The Academy*. "This happened because of the creativity of our team," he said. "We have folks who are passionate about what they do to help students succeed. We matched that with the opportunity to create our own internal program, using our own employees, who are enthusiastically dedicated to making connections everyday with our students. This program will not only pay for itself, but will eventually create a revenue stream for the district."

The school will be staffed by Leshar, who is also the district's Supervisor of STEM as well as the Supervisor of Instructional Coaches -- along with Teacher on Special Assignment Jamie Maddon, counselor Andy Scappaticci, and teachers Chris Roth and Katie Stout. A part-time nurse will be added.

"We have a strong team here that has either worked in an alternative setting at some point in their career or has shown an ability to excel serving a population similar to that of *The Academy*," Leshar said.

The format, he said, allows for a spe-

cialized, structured educational environment that focuses on individualized behavioral support, consistent expectations and clear boundaries. The staff will work closely with students, families, and related service agencies to address the needs of this student population. Individual and group counseling are provided to each student to address issues that interfere with learning.

The curriculum is designed to meet the academic needs of the individual student with a focus on blended learning.

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Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner

Integrated into the program are community service activities and community interaction experiences that stress the connections to "real life," Leshar said.

For most students, Leshar stated that "*The Academy* is designed to be a short-term placement that encourages transition back to their school. The main focus of the staff's effort is to provide students with an opportunity to explore and modify behaviors, attitudes, and skills deficits that have deterred academic and personal success. Students who commit to the principles of the program and demonstrate adequate progress will be recommended to rejoin their school."

Most students will be on a half-day program. Some are enrolled at the Upper Bucks County Technical School. Others may have a job, take additional cyber classes at home or may not be

able to handle a full day of school. "The thought of coming for four hours is more tolerable for students who are disengaged from school," Hoffman said. "The goal is to return them to the high school, where they can reconnect and get back on track. We want them to understand they are still part of the school community."

The district has remodeled just over one-quarter of its 20,000 square-foot District Services Center to house the school. It includes classrooms with desks and flexible seating, commons area with tables, chairs and sofas, lunch/recreation room, staff break room, counselor's suite, offices for the principal and nurse, and bathrooms. Inspirational quotes are framed on the walls. The colors in most rooms are bold, with the exception of softer tones in the offices of the counselor and nurse.

At its August 9th meeting, the School Board recognized the efforts of the district's maintenance department for its dedication in transforming the space during eight weeks over the summer. "A lot of collaboration had to happen to make that work," said Kelly Harper, the district's director of facilities. The maintenance team includes Rob Christine, Gus Granger, Tony Henry, Jon Kingcade and Todd Pearson.

Hoffman, winner of the 2018 Outstanding Curriculum Development Award by the Pennsylvania Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, said that at one point in her career becoming principal of *The Academy* would have been "my dream job." But with a full plate of responsibilities directing the Office of Teaching and Learning, she's glad to see Leshar's passion for the role he's taken on.

"That I've had a part in making this possible is certainly exciting," she said. "I look at our effort with *The Academy* and am just so proud that I still have this connection to these kids."