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▲ Herron High School students (l-r) Trevor Bruce, Bonnie Kessinger, Kyrsten Wilson and Emma Hagenaur work on their studies at the second-year charter school will offers a “classical education.”

Nice scores – but goals are higher at Herron

HERRON HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS WEREN'T happy when they received the results of this year's standardized testing known as ISTEP. They acted immediately, creating a team to address what Greg Lineweaver called "the very real deficiencies we saw in math and language."

Then they learned – from an Indianapolis Star reporter – that their students' scores in language arts were the highest in the county. Herron's 10th graders posted the highest math scores, as well.

"We're incredibly proud of our students," said Lineweaver, who has taught English since the school's launch in the fall of 2007 and is now also chair of the Humanities Department. "But it's in our nature to say, 'Wow, that's not anywhere close to where we want to be.'"

The goal, he added, is not to pass tests. It is, Lineweaver said, "What do you want to achieve? We want students to be here who understand what we're all about."

Janet McNeal is principal of the charter school that moved into its permanent home in the newly renovated museum building once occupied by Herron School of Art. She said Herron's ISTEP achievements are evidence that the school's classical education format works – not that charter schools cherry-pick the best students from the public school system. That is a myth, she said, pointing out that 50 percent of Herron High School students fit the federal definition of being "at-risk."

Said Lineweaver, "Most students come here because we are offering something very specific." What that is, is a classical liberal arts education where, according to the school's website, "students are steeped in great historical thought and production. The curriculum includes formal instruction in Latin, logic, and rhetoric. Writing is stressed in every class – even music and art.

The school's educational philosophy is also underscored by this fact: this year's sophomores who attended Herron as freshmen scored 20 percent higher than did the sophomores who didn't go to Herron last year.

Further reinforcement came from testing done through the Northwest Evaluation Association, a program used by the majority of city and county schools. The computer-based testing program, aligned to this state's educational standards, revealed that, last year, Herron High School students increased their scores 3.2 grade levels in language arts and 2.3 grade levels in math.

McNeal stressed that the one-year increases were true of students at all levels of academic achievement, not just those at the highest level. She believes that the evidence is heartening for teachers, "but the real value is for the students. It's

doing amazing things for their self-esteem."

The school's early success, Lineweaver said, can be traced not only to the classical program but to the parents as well. "Our program is not going to be successful without the active and intense support of parents. And our parents are



▲ With an assist from Kalone Collins, sophomores Sara Swan (center) and Audrey Brinkers practice during music class.

held accountable." McNeal said parents are encouraged to take part in the school day. Many are even licensed substitute teachers, and others come in to do routine jobs freeing up staff for more important work.

For Lineweaver, one of the most important aspects of daily life at Herron High School is the constant contact with students. "You can't get lost here," he said. "Teachers are engaged with the students – it's like we're on call all day long, eight to five."

One-on-one relationships boost student achievement, but not without a price. "This is the hardest place I've ever taught – the expectations, the amount of student contact," he said. "But the pressure isn't external; it's internal. There's our desire to do it well."

There is also the added pressure of setting precedent. "Because we're building for the future," Lineweaver said, "we're building each step carefully." They think ahead: How will each idea play out in the future?

"We're creating a culture which will outlast all the students, all the teachers," Lineweaver added.

The sophomores are helping. The 10th-graders have seniority because they're the oldest in the building. The 11th grade won't be added until next year; 12th grade a year later. Most of the sophomores also spent last year attending a school which was housed in the basement of Harrison

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Center for the Arts. It was a bonding experience.

This year, they coach the freshmen. They even police bad behavior, counseling the newer students that “we don’t do that here.”

McNeal also believes strongly in the teaching staff. She said reports that charter schools are having trouble finding quality teachers does not apply to Herron. She said teachers are interested in the Herron method because the school’s board of directors has allowed true educators to be in charge. “We’re professionals who said we want to embrace best practices.”

Lineweaver appreciates the fact that charter schools are free of many of the rules which bind other schools. “There are no district mandates. We see problems, we address them. We don’t have to get approval – but that puts pressure on us to make good decisions.”

Herron also puts pressure on teachers to become part of the team the minute they first walk through the door. There is no treading-water time for the newcomers. It’s time to swim.

“We have to work as a team,” McNeal said. “This work is too hard not to share.” The veteran educator said she used to joke, “I’d only be a principal if I could start my own school.” It is a joke no more.

“It’s hard work,” she repeated, “but it is such a treasure to have this opportunity.”

– Bill Brooks