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School bell rings early for some students

Thursday, August 23, 2007

By Myron Kukla
The Grand Rapids Press

HOLLAND -- Sixth-grader Hailey Elgersma practiced the combination on her new school locker, where she will tape up her Black River Middle School class schedule and store her textbooks.

"There's a lot of new things I have to learn for school," said Hailey, 11, at Wednesday's orientation for new middle and high school students at Black River Public School.

"I need to remember my locker combination, my class schedule and the names of new classmates and teachers. It's all very exciting," said Hailey, who went to elementary school at Black River, but in portable classrooms outside the main building.

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Classes at the K-12 Holland charter school began this morning for 780 students and 70 teachers and staff. The school's enrollment is up nearly 10 percent from last year.

While most Michigan schools by state law are required to start after Labor Day, Black River is allowed to start early under a clause that gives grade 6-through-12 schools with Advanced Placement curriculum an exemption.

"We've always started this early, so that our second semester ends in mid-May to match up with National Advanced Placement Testing Week," said Black River Head of School David Angerer.

The clause in the state's Revised School Code doesn't sit well with Rockford Public Schools Superintendent Mike Shibler.

"I've never heard of it. We have Advanced Placement curriculum at Rockford, and I would certainly like us to start early, too," Shibler said.

Rockford, though, will start Sept. 4 along with most other public schools in Michigan.

A Sept. 4 start date would have given new Black River 10th-grader Zach Post an extra seven days of summer vacation if he had stayed at Holland High School, where he spent his freshman year. He decided to switch to Black River this year to be in a school with smaller class sizes.

"I don't mind missing a few days of vacation. I wanted to be in a smaller school where I wouldn't be lost in the crowd," said Zach, 15, who saw Black River's average class size of 20 as an educational advantage.

Because he is coming in as a sophomore, Zach won't have to meet the new Black River graduation requirement that students be accepted into a four-year college or university. That requirement begins for this year's freshman class. It was adopted by the school board earlier this year.

Zach plans to meet the requirement.

"I want to study engineering, so I'll be going to college when I graduate anyway," he said.

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