Taking Steps Up the Academic Ladder
Plans Are Solidifying For Governor's School

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New educational opportunities might be on the horizon for Prince William area students as educators come closer to finalizing plans for a proposed governor's school.

School officials from Prince William County, Manassas, Manassas Park and George Mason University will present their vision for the rigorous school March 5 at Verizon Auditorium on the university's Manassas campus. The event, from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., is sponsored by the Prince William County-Greater Manassas Chamber of Commerce.

"This is a way for us to initially share some of our thoughts about the project but also collect additional feedback from the community," said Michaelene Meyer, deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction in Manassas and a member of the governor's school committee. "We want to know what the community at large would like to see happen with this."

The three jurisdictions received a $100,000 state grant early last year to design Virginia's 19th governor's school. If their plan is approved by the Virginia Board of Education this summer, the school would open in September 2010 at George Mason's Manassas campus and focus on science, technology, engineering and math.

The Virginia Governor's School Program was established in 1973 and is designed to provide more academically and artistically challenging programs than in traditional high schools, according to the Board of Education Web site.

"We are a proposed site, but a lot has to be fine-tuned still," said Molly Grove, director of campus relations at George Mason. "But there have been no indications that this will not go through. Everything has been very positive."
Grove, with a committee of about 35 educators, parents and school board members, has spent the past year hashing out a vision and working to generate interest for the planned institution.

The group is proposing a half-day program, with students returning to their home school in the afternoon for English, government and elective classes, officials close to the project said, noting that transportation between facilities would be included.

This format would set the school apart from the full-day program at Fairfax County's prestigious Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology -- which drew a dozen Prince William students this year -- and be more in line with Mountain Vista Governor's School, which opened in 2006, at Lord Fairfax Community College in Warrenton and Middletown.

"Right now we are sending students to TJ, but if we can provide an alternative that can fit their need, we will be able to keep more students local," said governor's school committee member Sharon Henry, who heads the Office of Community and Business Engagement for Prince William schools. "We also feel the half-day program is a better fit for our students because they will still be able to participate in extracurricular activities and be a part of their home school."

The curriculum at the yet-unnamed school would be "very rigorous," Henry said, and focus heavily on biology, chemistry and physics. Students would participate in research projects, labwork and possibly partnerships or mentoring programs with companies with local operations, such as Lockheed Martin and Micron Technology.

"It will be a project-based curriculum, and classes will be integrated so students don't get just math or just biology," Meyer said, adding that all ideas are preliminary until approved by the state. "The program will be something that is beyond what a student can traditionally get in high school, or else it isn't a governor's school."

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