**Plymouth expands individual planning program**

The Plymouth School District recently completed the first round of PEP Talks with its eighth-graders and will be introducing the individual learning conferences to sixth-graders in February.

A PEP (short for Plymouth Educational Plan) Talk is a meeting between a counselor, a student and his or her parent(s) that focuses on the student's strengths and goals. They are held in the third, sixth, eighth, ninth and 11th grades, with plan updates in other years.

The focus of the talk varies somewhat with the student's age, moving from focusing on individual strengths in the lower grades to career exploration in the middle grades to career preparation in the high school.

**Enjoyed by students and parents alike**

At each level, however, the emphasis is on the positives, which is appreciated by students and parents. "I liked having my Mom say something good about me," one eighth-grader said.

Other students welcomed the chance to talk to their parents about their hopes for the future. "The most helpful part was the chance to tell my parents what interests me," one student said.

Students are making the connection between academic achievement and their futures, said Therese Unger, a counselor at Riverview. One sixth-grader told her he realizes he can't drink and party in high school if he wants to achieve his goal of becoming a plastic surgeon.

Parents, too, appreciate the chance to hear good things about their children, and to learn what their kids are thinking about their futures.

Some tears are shed at PEP Talks, confirmed Gordie McFarlane, a counselor at Riverview Middle School.

One parent wrote that it was nice to see her son talk so highly of himself. "He's not always the most open, so it was cool to see what his goals in life are. Thanks for taking the time to do this! I think this will only improve as the years go on -- hopefully by the time he graduates he will be confident in himself."

Other parents expressed a wish that such a program had been in place for their older children - or themselves.

"Being in the business world I think this is an extremely valuable tool to get our next leaders thinking of goals, strengths and challenges. I wish the tool was available when I was young," wrote one parent. "As a manager I am teaching adults these same things."

**Not your parents' guidance counselor**

The talks are a key component in the district's new Comprehensive Counseling Program. The goal of the program, based on state and national standards, is the academic success of every single student, Mr. McFarlane told the Plymouth School Board recently.

Counselors focus on helping each student identify 1) Who they are, i.e. their strengths and abilities; 2) Where they want to go; and 3) How they can get there.

"We want to help students find their way to a job they enjoy - and that will be available when they graduate," Mr. McFarlane said.

The program embodies a paradigm shift in the area of school counseling. Counseling is no longer the sole responsibility of school counselors (no longer known as guidance counselors), but is shared with the entire staff.

Counselors work with teachers to develop curriculum, said Anne Gamoke, director of pupil services. Assignments are made in language arts classes, in math classes, in sciences classes.

For example, counselors might add a life skill such as group work into a math class, said Mr. McFarlane, who has been a counselor for more than 20 years.

And while counselors still help students in crisis, they also provide individualized planning for all students in the form of PEP Talks.

The approach is working, according to district counselors. The state has found that achievement goes up, as measured by GPA, Mr. McFarlane said. Other benefits include decreased discipline problems and drop-out rates.