

EagleTribune.com, North Andover, MA

June 12, 2013

Fifth Grade Academy gets new name, to add more grades

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---- — LAWRENCE — The Fifth Grade Academy within South Lawrence East School, has a new name, and beginning next year, more students as well.

Last month, the school was renamed “Spark Academy” after members of the School Council, made up of Principal Kevin Qazilbash, teachers and parents unanimously voted on it. English as a second language teacher, Gabriel Olmeda, came up with the name.

“Spark is a fitting metaphor for our program,” Olmeda wrote on the reason why he chose the name.

He said the school name honors the work of Dr. John Ratey in his book “Spark.” Ratey, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School has written on the connection between exercise and the brain’s performance.

“In our academy, we are creating the spark for increasing our heart rates with rigorous exercise and creating the spark for learning in our challenging academic classes. That is our promise for our students, but we are simply supplying the spark, Olmeda said.

“A spark is only as good as the fire it builds. It is up to you, the students, to bring that spark into a flame of passion for healthy living and an intellectual mind,” he wrote.

“After leaving this school, we hope you grow your flame into a fire that will enhance our world and our community with positive change. But always remember, it starts with a spark.”

Students in the Spark Academy spend two extra hours at school Monday through Thursday interweaving academics with dancing, stepping, or new athletic skills.

In addition to the new name, Spark Academy will add a new grade in the next three years until it encompasses a 5-8 middle school. Next year, sixth graders will be part of Spark Academy, followed by seventh graders in 2013-2014 and eighth graders in 2014-2015.

“We want to make sure we do it slowly, but right, with a smaller number of students,” Qazilbash said.

Spark Academy was launched last year as part of the turnaround program suggested by Lawrence Public School Superintendent/Receiver Jeffrey C. Riley. The school was chosen because the middle school had been designated a Level 4 school which have been under performing in achievement, student growth and the statewide MCAS test.

Qazilbash and his staff studied similar programs in other parts of the country where children learn more

effectively when they raised their heart rates by exercising, before going to the classroom.

Riley is pleased with the work at the school.

“All signs indicate that the first year at SLE Fifth Grade Academy has been the success we expected it to be, with students, parents and staff all responding well to the unique approach,” Riley said. “We’re excited to be moving forward with the plan to let it grow, and seeing the progress continue with more students under the Spark Academy name.”