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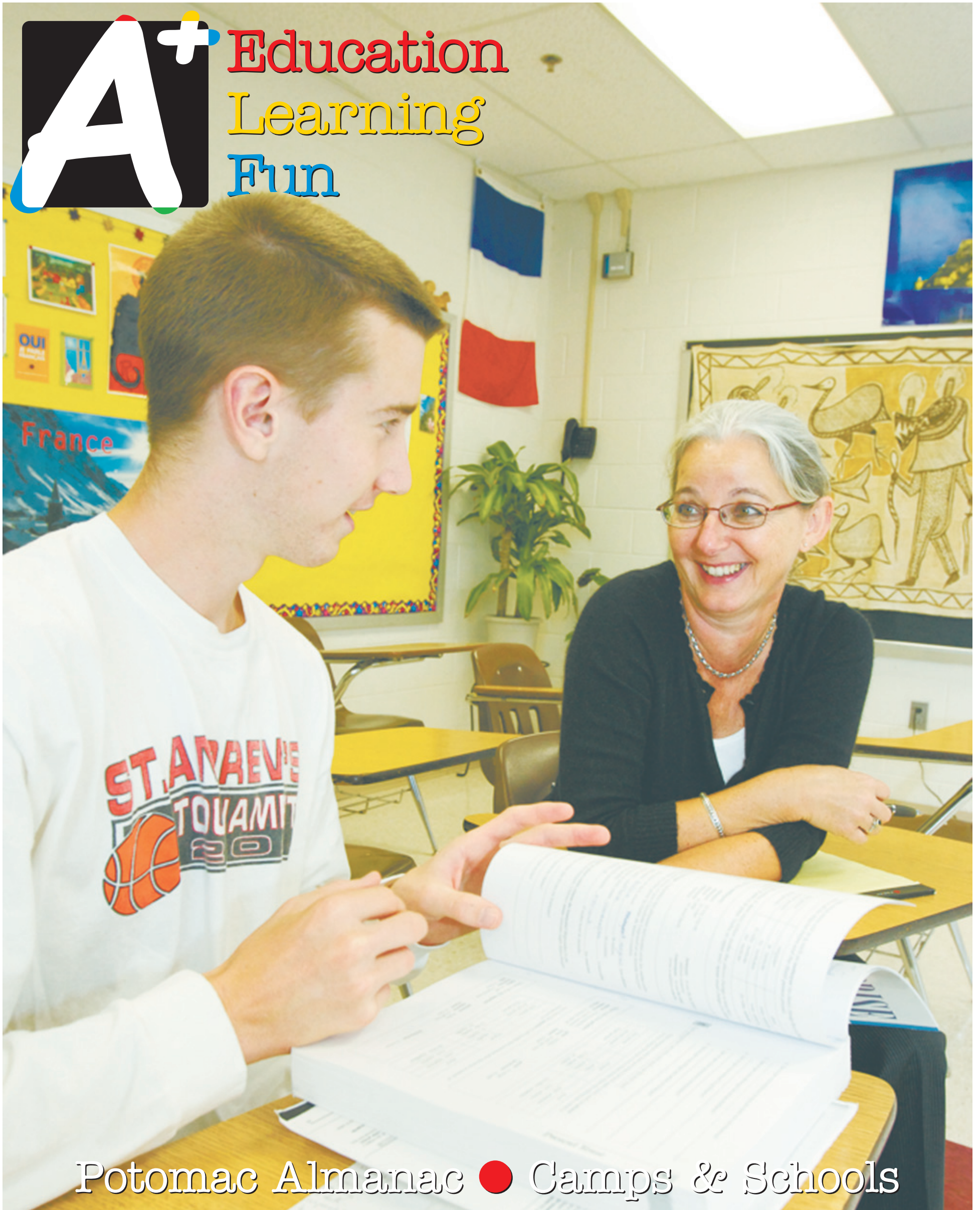


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Potomac Almanac ● Camps & Schools

More for Gifted Students?

Lower student-to-teacher ratios can allow for more individualized teaching in private schools.

By **Julia O'Donoghue**
The Connection

Alexa Williams knew her academic experience would be different when she transferred into Episcopal High School in 10th grade.

The teenager grew up in the Mount Vernon area and attended Fairfax County Public Schools up until then. Attending Episcopal, a boarding school in the City of Alexandria, would be nothing like her ninth grade year at West Potomac High School.

But Alexa, who had always been a straight-A student, was unprepared for how much more challenging Episcopal's curriculum was.

"I got straight A's without trying to hard and I took four honors classes at West Potomac, which is the most you can take as a freshman," said Alexa,



Photo by Julia O'Donoghue/The Connection
Ken Nysmith is the head of school at Herndon's Nysmith School for the Gifted, one of a few independent schools in the area that caters exclusively to students considered intellectually advanced.

who had also gone through the honors program at Carl Sandburg Middle School and taken some pull-out "gifted and talented" classes at Fort Hunt Elementary School.

Alexa assumed that, even if she had to try a little bit harder in school, she would be able to earn all A's at Episcopal as well. She was wrong.

Even though she was giving it her all, Alexa's grades still dropped sophomore year as she adapted to Episcopal's tougher academic standards.

"I had to take a grammar test at Episcopal and I completely failed it. I didn't even know what a gerund was," said Alexa, who had always considered English her best subject. At West Potomac, she had earned a numerical average of 100 percent in her ninth grade honors English class.

See **Accelerated Learners**, Page 3

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Accelerated Learners

From Page 2

“I didn’t really know how to study before Episcopal,” she added.

Now headed into her senior year, Alexa’s grades have gone back up and she has adjusted to Episcopal’s higher academic standards. She is planning to take five Advanced Placement classes this fall, though she said most of her general education classes will also be challenging.

“I think the regular classes at Episcopal are equal to the honors classes at West Potomac,” said Alexa.

FAIRFAX and Montgomery counties have robust and well-regarded public education programs for students who are motivated and academically advanced.

Both offer a range of educational options for students who are working above-grade level, including honors, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. But the academic programs in the two suburban school systems that are considered the most elite tend to be the “gifted and talented” centers, where qualified students have their own teachers and only take classes with each other.

In Fairfax, about 13 percent of the elementary and middle school students are enrolled in one of these special gifted centers at the elementary and middle school level. Out of the county’s 12,900 ninth grade students, just 480 – including a handful from outside Fairfax County – were admitted to attend Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, Fairfax’s only magnet program for the upper grades.

Montgomery County’s gifted and talented centers are even more exclusive. The Maryland school system identified nearly 34 percent of its student population as “gifted” last year but just four percent of elementary school students, three percent of middle school students, and two percent of high school students attend the most exclusive programs.

With few slots available, both Fairfax and Montgomery counties adhere to relatively rigid admissions standards when it comes to centers and schools for students identified as “gifted.”

The two public school systems rely heavily on standardized test scores to determine who is initially “center eligible.” Students who do not

● On the Cover:

Senior Mark Small and language teacher Chantal Cassan-Moudoud of St. Andrew’s Episcopal School in Potomac.

Photo Contributed



Photo by Harvey Levine/The Almanac

The philosophy at St. Andrew’s Episcopal School in Potomac emphasizes persistence, embracing the idea that if a student works hard enough, he or she can perform at a very high level, regardless of aptitude.



Robert Kosasky, head of St. Andrew’s Episcopal School in Potomac.

achieve a very high score on an aptitude test are usually not even considered for gifted center admission, though they can enroll in honors and advanced placement courses at the middle and high school level.

LOCAL PRIVATE SCHOOLS take a very different approach to the education of academically advanced students and could offer an alternative to parents of high-performing students who are able to cover the tuition costs, which are typically well over \$20,000 per year.

“We don’t label kids. We are opposed to the whole idea of children thinking of themselves as gifted and talented,” said Robert Kosasky, head of school at St. Andrew’s Episcopal School in Potomac.

Kosasky said St. Andrew’s likes to emphasize persistence over natural ability. They want students to know that if a person works hard enough, they can perform at a very high academic level, regardless of their innate aptitude.

Several other administrators made similar remarks about their school’s philosophy and said that is why the standards for their advanced academic standards tend to be more flexible than the public school system.

For example, several private schools are more likely to let a child take an honors or accelerated course if the student is enthusiastic about the subject but even if he or she hasn’t been identified as advanced in that area.

MANY INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS said they did not have a “cut off” score students must achieve on a standardized test to be accepted either to the school in general or into an honors class, like the public school systems do.

At The Potomac School in McLean, math is the only subject for which students are separated out into different classrooms by ability, and that separation does not happen until students reach the seventh grade.

But at Potomac, until ninth grade, there are no honors or advanced sections for courses like science, social studies or language arts, though

students in one class section may be “grouped together” based on ability level, said Bill Cook, Potomac’s assistant head of school for academics.

Cook would not answer whether Potomac considers all of its students gifted and talented.

“That is the kind of question I would rather not answer but we are blessed with an able constituency of families. That doesn’t mean they are all brilliant though,” said Cook.

MANY INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS also offer more opportunity for students who might be considered gifted in certain subjects areas but are not academically advanced across the board.

In both counties, elementary school gifted and talented centers take an “all or nothing” approach to education. Students are unable to enroll in gifted and talented center classes for just one class, like math, while working at or below grade level in another course, like language arts.

Those who are “center eligible” are assumed to be intellectually advanced in all core subject areas. In Fairfax, this is even true at the middle and high school level. For example, all English classes at Thomas Jefferson are considered to be “honors” courses, even though the school focuses on science and technology.

Most private school administrators interviewed said it is rare for any one student to be one of the highest achievers across all subject areas.

“We do not have a gifted and talented track. ... We find that students’

See **Smaller Classes**, Page 6

Heat a **Hot** Topic at Football Camps

With two-a-days underway, football teams are mindful of heat.

By Jason Mackey
The Connection

As late afternoon and early evening met one another and the sun slid into a crease between the trees that line Yorktown's football field, the lengthy drive from Maryland for that evening's opponent, the Forestville Military Academy's Mighty Knights, suddenly became a point of contention.

For the past hour or so, Bruce Ferratt was performing his normal routine; a sling psychrometer in his left hand and a digital psychrometer in his right, Yorktown's head athletic trainer was measuring wet-bulb temperature or the evaporation of moisture on a surface or skin — essentially how well the body can cool itself. Ferratt, because he's practically maniacal about these sorts of things, takes the average of both readings.

The number Ferratt calculated was upwards of 81 degrees Fahrenheit, which is a threshold for safety. So, Ferratt consulted with the game officials, as well as Patriots coach Bruce Hanson and the school's director of student activities, Mike Krulfeld. All agreed that it wasn't something they would try to push, especially not with the July death of Edwin "Dek" Miller, a football player at Northwest High School in Germantown, Md.

The scrimmage was delayed for 45 minutes until the temperature cooled down enough to produce an acceptable reading.

In the wake of Miller's death, everyone involved with high school football has become more attuned to heat and acclimatization matters. The National Athletic Trainers' Association published a set of preseason heat-acclimatization guidelines for secondary schools, which lists, among other things, a suggested building-up period to the most grueling practices.

Joe Allen is the head coach at Winston Churchill High School in Potomac and knows Northwest's head coach, Mark Maradei, on a personal basis.

Every year before the first practice session, Allen hands out a pamphlet supplied by Montgomery County schools, explaining proper hydration to his players.

Practices at Churchill are typically kept to two hours, with a water break at least every half hour. Allen, like most of his coaching brethren, accepts responsibility for monitoring the situation, knowing all too well that sometimes players don't pay as much attention as they should to proper hydration.

"A lot of the onus is on these players because they think they have to tough it out," Allen said. "It's not just the coach's responsibility, but it shouldn't all fall on the kids. It's really everybody's responsibility to make sure everyone stays hydrated."

No longer are these the days of three-a-day workouts with water breaks manipulated for motivation or punishment. No longer are players handed a bottle of orange liquid and

told to be back in full pads at 1 p.m. Coaches and trainers must work together to be mindful of the weather, both because of prior misfortunes and for the prevention of future ones.

In-practice hydration techniques are more advanced than ever, with devices to calculate heat indexes on the fly and determine whether or not it's safe to conduct practices outside. At several schools, parents team up to provide a tent for between-practice refuge, filled with sodium-infused snacks and drinks to replenish lost electrolytes.

"Rehydration is a 24-hour-a-day issue," said Jon Almquist, the athletic training administrator for Fairfax County Public Schools. "It's not just during practice. The parents have to get involved, making sure they're pushing the fluids and the proper fluids."

In the past year, Almquist said that 52 cases of heat-related illnesses were reported across Fairfax County schools, with 34 of them related to football. Furthermore, 34 happened during the fall sports season, with one occurring during the winter and 12 during the spring.

All were classified as minor, meaning less than seven days were lost from participation.

MEREDITH SHEERON, Lake Braddock's head athletic trainer and her assistant, Ashlee Harris, spend a good portion of each session during camp walking around the Bruins' foot-



Churchill's football team began practice for its 2009 season. With the death of Northwest's Edwin "Dek" Miller, coaches are more aware of heat and acclimatization issues.

ball practice field, measuring wet-bulb temperature like Ferratt.

The findings, which typically range from the high 60s to the low 80s, correspond with steps to take to eliminate risk for players. For example, if the wet bulb temperature that appears on Sheeron's screen is in the low 70s or below, practice will continue as

normal, and coaches are urged to increase the frequency of water breaks as a precaution.

But if the measurement falls between 75-76.9, players must remove their helmets if they're not participating in a football-related activity. If the reading falls between 77-78.9, all players must take off their shoulder pads and helmets for non-contact, teaching parts of practice. If it's 79-80.9, that means practice can only be completed in shorts and T-shirts.

But coaches, while mindful to not overexpose their players to excessively hot weather conditions, still want to improve their football team during summer camp.

Practice times have shifted; several teams now elect to start before sunrise and cram two sessions on the field before noon.

To further help players many coaches stress off-season conditioning more than ever.

"Being in shape for your sport helps tremendously with trying to alleviate any potential problems because your body is used to working out," said Ray Yamrus, George Mason University's head athletic trainer.



The Connection's Mark Giannotto contributed to this story.

Elite Sports, Private Schools

By Mark Giannotto
The Connection

Bishop Ireton junior Arturo Oberg says he made the right decision. Hailing from San Diego, Oberg had transferred to the Alexandria private school last fall with basketball on his mind.

He wanted to continue his career into college, maybe earn a full scholarship, and there was no better place to do it than the Washington Catholic Athletic Conference — home to several Northern Virginia private institutions.

"I moved here to compete in this league, as dumb as it sounds," said Oberg. "That's why I came here, to play with the best."

Just how good was the WCAC in boys' basketball this season? Before the winter began, five teams from the conference were voted into ESPN's top-50 national rankings.

That's standard protocol for almost every sport played within the private ranks around the Washington, D.C. area. With recruitment beginning as early as elementary school, every year the competition is stiff with teams chock full of talent. For high school sports enthusiasts, there's nothing like it.

The crème de la crème of private school athletics in the Connection's coverage area compete in either the WCAC (Bishop O'Connell, Bishop Ireton, and Paul VI) or the Interscholastic Athletic Conference (boys) and the female-only Independent School League, including Bullis, St. Stephen's/St. Agnes, and Episcopal. Here's a season-by-season guide to navigate one's way through leagues that consistently feature some of the best athletes in the country.

FALL

Those who have been around the area don't even blink an eye anymore when the subject of St. Stephen's/St. Agnes and its field hockey program are brought up. For a second-consecutive fall, the Saints went undefeated and won the ISL regular season, conference tournament, and state titles, a distinction long-



Harvey Levine/The Connection

Rising senior Taylor Hairston and the Bullis boys' tennis team have won five consecutive IAC titles.

time coach Marsha Way calls the "trifecta." For years now, the Saints have been the unquestioned leaders around the entire area when it comes to field hockey.

"I've been in this school since kindergarten and just every year seeing great field hockey teams, you just want to be a part of it," said senior Emily Conner.

Also this past fall, the Episcopal boys' soccer team capped off an undefeated season with a VISAA state title. The team featured All-Met Player of the Year Given Kalipinde.

WINTER

As Oberg accurately opined, the winters at private schools are dominated by the high school basketball scene. Head out to a WCAC boys' basketball game and chances are there will be a college coach from a Division-I program on the sidelines watching the action closely.

Bishop O'Connell, led by coach Joe Wootten, consistently produces solid teams. In the last nine years under Wootten, O'Connell has won four state titles, three conference championships, and sent players to Maryland, North Carolina, Villanova, and Georgetown. Next year's team will feature senior Kendall Marshall, another North Carolina commit.

Last winter, the Knights were featured in a February game on ESPN against rival DeMatha in front of a packed house. Tickets for the game sold out in minutes and national audience watched at

home.

"I think that says a lot about how good our league is," said Wootten. "I think it's good for high school basketball."

O'Connell also has one of the area's best wrestling programs under coach Bill Carpenter, who retired after 28 years at the helm this past winter.

SPRING

When it comes to the spring, it's all about lacrosse for private schools. Known to perennially be the best boys' lacrosse conference in the entire country, the IAC traditionally sends scores of players to the Division-I ranks.

All six teams in the conference are consistently competitive and some times it can create some awkwardness in terms of rankings. This past spring St. Stephen's/St. Agnes and Episcopal were rated as top-10 teams in Virginia and yet they finished fourth and sixth, respectively, within their own division.

"You just have to play your best every game or things aren't going to work out for you," explained Alex Clay of the Saints.

But at St. Stephen's/St. Agnes, it's all about girls' lacrosse during the spring. Just like their counterparts in field hockey, the Saints have dominated the girls' lacrosse landscape for years. This year's team was ranked No. 1 in the country for much of the season and featured eight Division-I recruits.

"There's definitely a legacy ... and you always want to live up to that," said senior Kelly Austin after the Saints won the state title again.

Right down the road in Alexandria, Bishop Ireton has also developed one of the top girls' lacrosse programs in the country over the past decade. The Cardinals, though, oftentimes, get overlooked because of their talented neighbors.

In baseball, Ireton won the 2008 WCAC title, while St. Stephen's/St. Agnes will feature senior Kendall Marshall, another North Carolina commit.

In boys' tennis, The Bullis School has won the past five IAC championships, cementing themselves as the pre-eminent private school program in the area.



Photo by Craig Sterbutzel/The Connection

Sophomore running back Joe Meier takes a handoff during the Robinson football team's first full practice of the year on Tuesday, Aug. 11.

Smaller Classes, More Options

From Page 3

performance in math and reading is not aligned at all. A child that is advanced in reading may not be advanced in math. In fact, they may need extra support in math," said Mimi Mulligan, admissions director and former teacher at Norwood School in Bethesda.

Even at Nysmith School for the Gifted, which uses I.Q. tests to help determine who is admitted, faculty do not find that students are working on a superior level in all academic courses.

"That is the exception. There are very, very few students who excel in all subject areas," said Ken Nysmith, who has been working at the Herndon school for about 25 years.

"Some of the children here are working on grade level in certain subjects," he said.

NYSMITH'S MOTHER, who taught in Fairfax County's gifted and talented program, originally started the school in the 1980s for kindergarten through second grade students, who were expected to feed into the local gifted

and talented center at Sunrise Valley Elementary School at third grade.

The school ended up expanding up to eighth grade at the suggestion of parents and families, Ken Nysmith said. Approximately 30 to 40 percent of the students who graduate from Nysmith end up attending Thomas Jefferson in high school, he said.

Like proponents of the gifted and talented centers in public schools, Nysmith said it is important for advanced students to be in a learning environment with their intellectual peers for social reasons.

In a program or school filled with gifted children, children who are exceptionally smart are not as likely to be picked on or isolated. They tend to feel more confident.

"The biggest benefit is that the children don't feel different," he said.

But even in a school focused on gifted children, Nysmith does not organize its class sections for most courses by ability level. Math is the only subject for which they separate out the more advanced students.

Instead, Nysmith faculty will teach children operating on several different grade levels in one class-

room. For example, children in one science class could be working on three or four different lessons at the same time, said Nysmith.

ONE OF the reasons private schools like Nysmith do not have to group students in classes by ability level is because of smaller class sizes with lower teacher-to-student ratios.

For example, at Nysmith, there is one teacher for every nine students and the faculty have time to give each child one-on-one attention.

At Norwood, individual classes for math and reading have no more than 12 students in them, compared to approximately 25 to 30 children that are grouped together in Fairfax County, regardless of whether it is a gifted or general education program.

"We have very small groupings so we

can meet every child's educational needs," said Mulligan of Norwood.

BUT A CRITICAL MASS of students, particularly for those operating well beyond their other "gifted" peers, can make a difference.

For example, at 480 students, Thomas Jefferson's freshman class is likely to be larger than the entire high school program at most independent schools. With that many academically advanced students, the school is more likely to be able to offer an extremely advanced class, like Real Analysis, an upper level college course.

Still, many administrators said their private schools can accommodate students who have moved beyond the school's standard curriculum. At Potomac, Cook taught a student advanced Latin one-on-one.

St. Andrew's has joined with other local private high schools in and around Potomac to offer one niche course, like Advanced Placement Economics, on each campus which only a few students from each individual school would be qualified to take.

"There are very, very few students who excel in all subject areas."

— Ken Nysmith,
Nysmith School for the Gifted



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Before and after ...

Sara Cohen is armed with pie, Riley Mackison is on the receiving end.

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