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A Brave New Education



Schools find success with non-traditional campuses

By Cody Cunningham

Some would say that you meander through many stretches of Highway 29, rather than simply drive them. More than likely, you began the leisurely drive by passing through Napa, and then eased off the pedal to enjoy the vibrant shades of green and sun-baked vineyards surrounding charming little villages like Yountville, Rutherford, and St. Helena. You probably even stopped by the historic Oakville Grocery to select picnic items before heading off to enjoy the splendor of the great California Wine Country.

What you probably didn't realize is that as you traveled up Highway 29, through the City of Napa, you were with-

in blocks of an organization that is working hard to transform the way schools and communities view education. New Tech Network is a non-profit organization that works with schools, districts, and communities to explore and develop innovative high schools. The organization was founded in Napa, California in 1996 and now partners with 41 schools in nine different states, including Texas.

The Rise of Project-Based Learning

What differentiates New Tech schools from more traditional high schools is that New Tech schools are not only focused, but grounded in a concept called Project-

based learning (PBL). New Tech describes teachers in this learning environment as facilitators and coaches rather than traditional “one-to-many instructors”. Students are expected to work in teams, and they are not only graded on the final project, but on how effective they are at working with each other.

Many would argue that there is nothing novel about this type of learning. What is innovative, however, is the degree to which Project-based learning and student work groups permeate through every aspect of the New Tech campuses. In fact, the New Tech Network has developed a proprietary web-based system, PeBL Collaborative Learning Environment, which allows students to “share projects online, collaborate, and create new knowledge.”

In addition to student collaboration, the schools garner student involvement at an even higher level by expecting students to be involved in campus leadership, and even to develop school policy. The organization sees traditional management practices like hall passes or class bells as a thing of the past. They even go as far as asking teachers to model a team-based approach and afford teachers the flexibility of customizing classes, determining how the classes function together, and which



types of projects will be most effective for students.

Texas is home to seven New Tech schools. In the fall of 2008, New Tech High at Coppell (NTH@C), opened its doors and offered high school students in Coppell ISD an alternative to the traditional high school experience. The school is an open enrollment campus and students apply to attend. In its first year, the school opened with grades 9 and 10. This year the school enrolled roughly 390 students in grades 9 -11. Next year, the school will serve up to 500 students in grades 9 -12.

The new high school offers wireless computer access, has a 1:1 computer to

student ratio, and students use a variety of technologies and computer applications to work on group projects. One of the requirements for all students is to complete what is called a digital student portfolio. In many of the New Tech schools the digital portfolios are posted on school websites and include a student's biography, resume and future resume, student work and projects, letters of recommendation, and other items that help a student develop a sense of identity, direction, and ambition.

Building Matters

Many educators have advocated that while a rigorous curriculum and effective

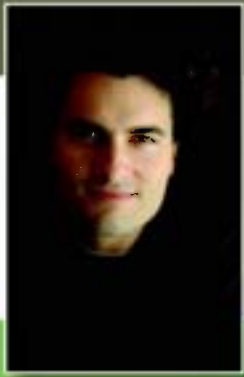


Across, Frisco ISD's Career and Technical Education Center (CTE) is specifically designed for students to leave their campus for certain courses and take them in a facility uniquely suited for CTE programs.

Above, the Frisco CTE Center is home to a culinary arts and hospitality program where students learn nutrition and food science, restaurant operation and management, and technology applications in the food industry.

Left, students apply to attend the new, modern CTE facility at Carl Wunsche Senior High School, in Spring ISD (a suburb of Houston).

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teaching is paramount, we must not forget the impact that facilities can have on learning. In the past, many school systems added computers and called themselves innovative. They added day-lighting to a campus and called a school "sustainable." Districts across Texas and the U.S. designed beautiful schools that were both safe and practical. However, rarely were the changes to the overall student learning experience much different. They may have been more comfortable, and safer, but not significantly different.

While our teachers were being asked to engage students more effectively, employ more hands-on activities, inspire critical thinking, and develop independent and self-disciplined learners, many were operating in the same types of facilities with the same resources that were used decades ago. The reality is that for a long time teachers wanted and needed the latitude and resources to be creative in the classroom. That desire is being reflected in many of the newer architectural designs in education. Project-based learning, New Tech schools, and facilities like Career and Technical Education centers are opening new doors for educators.

Help is on the Way

Last year, Frisco High School students had their first opportunity to take courses in the Frisco ISD Career and Technical Education Center (CTE). The mission of the facility and program is to "prepare students to succeed in high demand occupations within the 21st century's competitive global economy." Offering CTE courses is not a new concept, but some districts are beginning to see phenomenal results by integrating the courses into a facility that is as innovative as the curriculum.

For example, the Frisco CTE Center is home to a culinary arts and hospitality program where students learn nutrition and food science, restaurant operation and management, and technology applications in the food industry. The key is that much of this learning occurs in the Center's new industrial standard kitchen and restaurant.

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The Frisco ISD Career Tech Center allows students to study veterinary science in a specially appointed portion of the facility.

Hollywood animation studios. Students interested in crime scene investigation (CSI) can take one of several courses under the Legal Studies career pathway. More importantly, they can perform lab studies related to the course material using many of the same methods that forensic scientists use today.

While CTE facilities aren't cheap, districts are finding that building a stand-alone CTE facility, where multiple high schools can bus students throughout the day for courses, is an efficient use of both the facility and staff without duplication of resources. For example, a district can opt to build one flagship broadcast/journalism studio rather than multiple scaled-down versions at several high schools.

Some districts are even taking the project-based learning concept and CTE facility and combining them into a full-time learning experience. Students at Carl Wunsche Senior High School in Spring ISD (a suburb of Houston), apply to attend the school and then select a desired career path. Students stay at the school throughout the duration of their

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high school career, much like the New Tech schools, but pick a field that interests them and take a series of courses intertwined within that particular path. Students select from what they refer to as the three Towers: the Professional Tower, the Technology Tower, or the Medical Tower. Each tower has a group of associated fields in which students can explore traditional and specialized coursework through the lens of a particular pathway. The philosophy is that student's will learn more effectively by integrating the entire curriculum within a topic and career path that is relevant and interesting to the student.

Innovative Learning in McKinney ISD

Recently, a new five year McKinney ISD Strategic Plan was developed through the involvement of over 175 teachers, parents, administrators, and members of the community. One of the action plans born out of the process is to "strengthen and expand career and technical education programs that develop student learning resulting in certification for transition into the community and global workforce."

Another goal seeks to "Evaluate the possibility of a state of the art, stand along Career and Technology Education (CTE) Center offering a wide variety of course selections that address student needs, interests, and strengths in order to prepare students for career/college options."

So, if you were wondering who decides whether or not a district has learning environments like a New Tech school or a Career and Technical Education facility, the answer is you do. The community decides and, in some respects, already has through the strategic planning process. How learning occurs or the types of facilities our children learn in has little to do with what we are currently doing, but has everything to do with what the community expects for our future. Fortunately, we can rest assured that many of our community members have already been thinking about this, and our children will benefit greatly as a result. [ML](#)

About the author: Cody Cunningham is Assistant to the Superintendent for Communications at MISD

