

February 2017 Op Ed

Innovative Instructional Practices in Plainville Community Schools

At the start of the 2016-17 school year, Plainville Community Schools' teachers were introduced to the concept of developing an "Innovator's Mindset." This was defined as the belief that abilities, intelligence, and talents are developed so that they lead to the creation of new and better ideas (Couros, 2015). This is something that our faculty would foster and develop within their own teaching practices, which would ultimately make teaching and learning more engaging for students. Not surprisingly, our teachers have embraced this work in a variety of ways. In fact, when I asked teachers to share their innovative teaching practices for this year, I received more ideas than I could ever summarize in one article.

Plainville High School Science teachers Paris Godbout and Mary Tullo have embarked on a process call Mastery-Based Learning. This practice allows students multiple chances throughout a given course to show that they have mastered a skill, rather than one end of unit test. This practice has many advantages as it allows both teachers and students to clearly see what skills students have mastered, which skills are progressing, and which skills are still in need of improvement. When teachers know exactly what a student has learned, it allows them to work as a personalized learning coach and address those skills in which students need more support. Students are also more engaged in their own learning and become more motivated to really master their learning targets, rather than simply pass a test.

Throughout the entire school district, Plainville teachers have been learning more about this practice by reading the book, **Leaders of Their Own Learning**. It starts with teachers clearly stating to their students what they are going to learn by identifying learning targets. These are posted prominently in the classroom and referred to throughout the lesson.

At Wheeler Elementary School, fifth grade teacher Karen Miller has begun having students lead their own parent teacher conferences. Ms. Miller's students clearly understand what they have learned and what they are still learning. They set goals based on learning targets and pre-assessments. They reflect on their progress weekly and revise learning goals as needed. Since students are becoming more aware and involved in their own learning, they can now clearly explain their learning progress to parents at conference time. I am very proud of our teachers who have embraced this process, which I believe will lead to more student engagement and better learning outcomes.

Another innovative practice called "Makerspace" was initiated last year at Toffolon Elementary School by Library Media Specialist, Deb Pikiell after receiving a grant for materials from the Elizabeth Norton Trust Fund. Makerspaces provide hands-on, creative ways to encourage students to design, experiment, build and invent as they deeply engage in science, engineering and tinkering. Makerspaces are innovative because students are empowered by the control they have over their discoveries. It builds a culture that values creativity, critical thinking, and cooperative learning. Students explore Science Technology Engineering, Art, and Math (STEAM) concepts while developing their own

personal interests and strengths. A Makerspace is not a science lab, computer lab or art room, but it may contain elements found in all of these more familiar spaces. They are designed to accommodate a wide range of activities, tools and materials. Diversity of activities is critical to the design, making and exploration process. Our students have engaged in many exciting activities during the Makerspace process such as video production, robotics, textiles and sewing, cardboard construction, and electronics. This year Makerspace at Toffolon is coordinated by new Library Media Specialist, Julianna Cobuzzi, Art Teacher, Mike Zaba, Music Teacher, Greg Wilfrid, and Physical Education Teacher, Rob Silliman. Makerspace has been so successful at Toffolon that Ms. Pikiell, in her new role as Instructional Leader for Library Information Teachers district-wide, is working to expand this innovation to Linden and Wheeler elementary schools using monies donated to the school district from the Florence FitzGibbon Trust.

I am very excited about the innovative practices being embraced by our very talented teachers in the Plainville community school district. I am certain this work will promote more student engagement, creativity, and ensure our graduates are ready for college and careers in the 21st Century.