



Boards Making a Difference

New Hampton Board Leadership Moves District to Culture of Innovation, Passion-Based Learning

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Everyone you meet has an idea or notion of what school should look like—whether it’s similar to when they went to school 50 years ago, or 20 years ago, or even just five years ago. Today’s schools are much different than yesterday’s schools— they are constantly changing and evolving to keep up with the learning needs of students, the ever-changing needs of the workforce and to stay up-to-speed with technology.

But, some schools are more different than others. Take New Hampton Schools, for example. Board and administrative leadership are leading the charge to give students more choices and control over their own learning. How? Through a culture of innovation, a belief in failing forward, and a focus on personalized learning.

“We know that everyone learns differently and you learn more if you’re passionate about it. If we can figure out how to incorporate other subject areas into these passion projects, students will get more out of it. That’s why we’re here—to help students succeed as much as we can,” said Board Member Jay Matthews.

IOWA BIG INITIATIVE IGNITES PASSION AND JUMP-STARTS THE CHANGE

It all started three years ago with Iowa BIG North. This initiative, made up of New Hampton, Charles City, Osage, Rudd-Rockford-Marble Rock, Turkey Valley, Riceville and North Butler partners students with community businesses to solve problems and gain hands-on skills. Students are engaged in deep learning



and developing critical thinking skills to help them succeed in a globally-connected world.

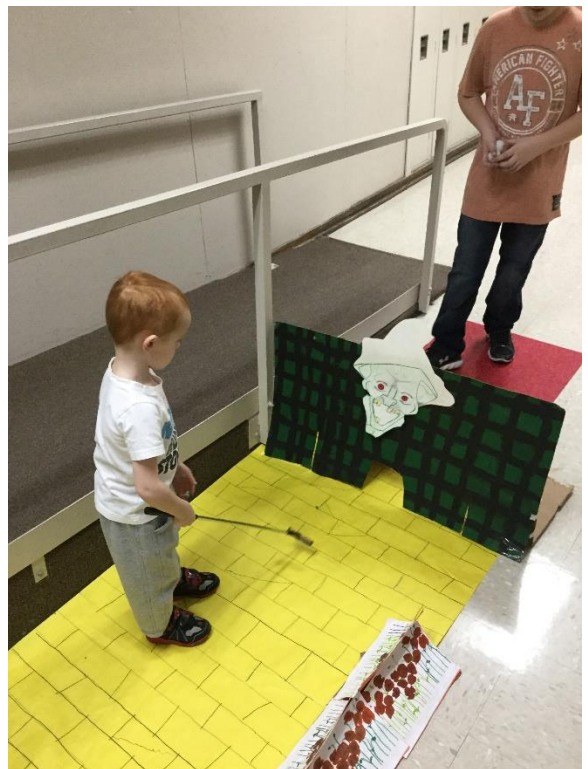
“Our board has really embraced project-based learning and the mantra of failing forward. It’s help our administration and staff feel like they can experiment and know that not everything is going to be perfect the first time. We want them to create the best learning environment for the students,” said Matthews.

Iowa BIG North introduced the board, administration, staff and students to a completely different learning model, which inevitably led to parents questioning whether their students were learning critical, essential skills that would help them succeed in the real world.

“Every district struggles to get the community into the school and see what’s happening, so having Iowa BIG North students out in the community and working with businesses, that really helped people see what’s going on inside the schools, and helped parents understand what this program was about,” said Matthews.

This year, Iowa BIG North has 48 New Hampton juniors and seniors participating and working with local businesses on projects ranging from creating employee safety training videos to designing an outdoor space for employees to relax.

“We’re moving toward student voice and student choice. Giving students the opportunity to do things they are passionate about. Iowa BIG North got the board thinking about what’s coming next,” said Superintendent Jay Jurrens.



BOARD GOALS AND BOARD LEARNING HELP DEEPEN BOARD UNDERSTANDING

So, what was next? Once the board saw firsthand student passion and excitement surrounding Iowa BIG North projects, they knew they had to look for more ways to bring this type of learning to even more students. What does a school board do first? They create board goals, of course.

“Last year we set a board goal to ensure that every K-12 student had a project-based learning experience. We didn’t define what it had to be or look like, just that we want everyone to have one,” said Matthews.

The board also set aside time to engage in a whole board book study with the teacher leadership team as facilitators. They chose George Couros' *The Innovators Mindset: Empower Learning, Unleash Talent, and Lead a Culture of Creativity*. The board and student board member participated, and even brought George Couros in for a teacher professional development day.

"The biggest takeaway from the book was that we think we're experts on what kids need in school because we went through it, but that's not what kids need today. It pushed us to get the community involved, which naturally happens with Iowa BIG North, but we're going even further," said Jurrens.

The district partnered with Northeast Iowa Community College, passed a referendum, and is in the middle of building a new 5-8 middle school which includes a vocational training shop. Local businesses have invested in the project, committing funds to help provide opportunities for kids to participate in hands-on passion projects.

MID-MESTER AND J-TERMS GIVE STUDENTS DEDICATED TIME FOR DEEP LEARNING

Three years ago they introduced middle school mid-mesters—where teachers present several different project opportunities and students choose their area of interest, dedicating two to three hours per day on that project.

Then, last year, they implemented j-terms in the high school, where students can choose an area of interest and go in-depth for about 10 school days. At the end of each j-term, students show off their projects in a community-wide open house.

"We invite the community into these open houses—everyone is welcome to see what the kids are doing. We are trying to get more parents and community members involved in the school, to see what's going on," said Board President Joe Rosonke.

Once the school invited the community in to see these student projects, they received positive feedback and saw the community gain a deeper understanding of what these new initiatives were doing to help students decide on future career paths. But they realized they had to ramp up their communications to parents—spread the information even further.

The district now uses [#NHTribe](#) on Facebook and Twitter when they post videos, information, newsletters, and photos. "We're trying to communicate what we're doing so everyone can see—we're sharing the goal of the board, what's going on in school, it really helps us tell our story more effectively. These are student-focused posts," said Matthews.

PLANS TO TRANSITION PROJECT-BASED LEARNING INTO THE CLASSROOM

"Schools are changing quickly, and I think we're on the cusp of what that change is going to look like. Our board really recognizes that and has provided leadership so that we can change. Not all schools have responded like we have," said Jurrens.

It's clear that the district is moving in the right direction—the next step is to transition project-based learning into the classrooms in an every-day setting. The students will still be learning the curriculum,

but in a different way. Last year, the board set a goal to evaluate classrooms to find out whether they were learning toward more student-centered learning or teacher-centered learning environments.

The administrative/teacher leadership team reported back, with good results—a higher percentage of student-centered learning than they had anticipated. But they knew they could improve.

“We’re not in the same world we used to be, where we all sat in a line and listened to the teacher and tried to memorize everything. Kids are learning in an entirely different world. We’ve got to do something to keep up and keep them interested. We’re giving them something more—something that makes families want to go to New Hampton Schools,” said Rosonke.

DATA PROVIDES ASSURANCE THAT NEW HAMPTON IS ON THE RIGHT PATH

Sometimes, schools try something new and it doesn’t work out the way they had hoped. That’s not the case in New Hampton. They knew these passion-based projects and experimentation in the classroom could have a negative impact on test scores. But, they didn’t see that. The standardized indicator remained the same. They’ve seen positives—a decrease in student absenteeism, to name a big one. And before, they saw a sizable drop in test scores from sophomore to junior year in the past, but they didn’t see that drop this year.

“We’ve been watching the data closely because we want to make sure they’re learning, that’s why we’re here. We’re in the business to make sure kids learn what they need to learn, so we’re looking at the data we’ve always reviewed,” said Jurrens.

And how do you measure whether students are future-ready? The district plans to survey graduates two to three years post-high school and ask how these experiences helped them. Once they’ve compiled the information, they plan to release it to the public.

Thanks to board leadership and support, New Hampton is on the path toward giving all students opportunities to learn at a different level and succeed.

Meet the New Hampton School Board