



Boards Making a Difference

Farm School Provides Hands-On (And Fun) Learning Experiences

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“Three years ago, we were a few thousand dollars away from closing Hamburg Schools, with a negative unspent balance. Now, our unspent balance is right around one million and we’re providing unique learning opportunities that our students, staff and community are excited about,” said Hamburg Superintendent Mike Wells.

Hamburg Schools, a small K-8 district in southwest Iowa, was in a dire financial state just a few years ago. Thanks to new initiatives and efficient financial planning, the district is thriving today.

“You do what you have to do to survive. We battled with spending authority, and not only are we trying to differentiate ourselves from other schools, but we are trying to survive,” said Hamburg Board President Dave Mincer. In order to turn the district’s finances around, the board has reduced administrators and asked staff to take on additional shared roles. “We’ve reduced where we need to and put money in kids and programming,” said Wells.

FARM SCHOOL TAKES SHAPE

The district is reinventing student learning through project-based learning opportunities. Three years ago, they started a “Farm School”. Sixth grade students first went before the city council, asking permission for a variance to allow livestock within city limits. Once this was approved, students then presented the idea to the school board.

“We needed something that would set our district apart and make our learning experiences unique. We looked at available funding and determined there were



multiple grant opportunities that would enable the Farm School to essentially pay for itself,” said Mincer. In addition to grants, several community groups have provided funding, and individual community members have donated to the program.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT ON THE RISE

These grants and donations have allowed the board to focus on student achievement, rather than worrying about funding the initiative. The board is seeing increased student achievement and leadership, as well as gains in practical knowledge and problem-solving skills.

“Our students are putting themselves in situations where they can fail—they are tasked with chores and problems they have to solve and think through. They have to be resourceful,” said Mincer, “The biggest thing we’re doing for our students is giving them opportunities to learn by doing, instead of learning by rote. It’s huge.”

The Farm School program features authentic learning experiences for students, a chance for them to “roll up their sleeves and work”. Students have designed and built a chicken coop, constructed a greenhouse, and designed and built a picket fence with more than 300 pickets.

“The board has learned that there’s a place for traditional education and it’s important, but we need to think outside the box,” said Wells. Teachers are supportive of the initiative, incorporating farm school into their curriculum. “Teachers and staff are excited to step up and do it, because they know how important this is,” said Wells.

Once a year, students present to the board on progress and future plans. In addition to providing updates to the board, students have an opportunity to practice public speaking skills.

INITIATIVE SPURS EXCITEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

The board is seeing engaged and excited students. “At the beginning of each school year, students sign up if they are interested in volunteering to complete chores for the farm school. Out of 160



students, all but three volunteered,” said Wells. Students are giving up recess and arriving at school early and leaving late, all voluntarily, to do chores.

The board sees the excitement in the eyes of students, making it all worth it. “A young boy who didn’t like to read, was encouraged to read to the piglets. He read to them, and now he enjoys reading,” said Wells.

Before the Farm School, the district’s summer program was not what you would call “popular” for students. Now, half the students in the district participate because they love Farm School. “If you can instill that kind of excitement in kids—that’s part of our role as a board—to help kids get excited and want to learn,” said Mincer.

Prior to the Farm School, the district struggled with open enrollment out. Today, they have maintained open enrollment-in. “If we weren’t offering unique opportunities like this, we’ve had a higher open enrollment out,” said Wells, “Families see what we are offering and are excited to send their kids to school here.”

GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

The community sees the changes the board has made to provide cutting-edge programming for students, and truly values the board. “It’s exciting. Even a small rural school that was broke a few years ago can offer this programming, thanks to effective planning and excellent leadership from the school board,” said Wells.

Students are learning about community service and the value of helping others. Students collect three dozen eggs each day and donate a portion of them to the nursing home. This has transitioned into students voluntarily reading to elderly community members, among other activities.

FARM SCHOOL TODAY

Today, the school boasts a chicken coop, pigs, sheep, goats, ducks all raised by students, a greenhouse and garden.



So, what's next for the Farm School? Plans are underway for an aquaponics system with tilapia, incorporating garden and farm produce into the school lunch program, and a community grocery store operated by students.

Meet the Hamburg School Board

