

'ARCTIC Zone' Visit Prompts New Thinking About Education

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District
Tuesday, 17 January 2017 11:04

<http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/arctic-tundra-s5.jpg>



The Authentic Real-world Curriculum & Technology-infused Classroom (ARCTIC) at Northstar Middle School in Eau Claire provides an innovative way to teach sixth graders and allows students to prepare for the 21st century workforce in a reimagined classroom.

EAU CLAIRE, WI - Two six-graders recently showed me around their classrooms. Desks were not in straight rows. Students were not waiting their turn with raised hands. I looked around the room. There actually were no desks at all, but tables and different types of chairs.

One student was actually writing on a table with a red marker. I must have looked aghast. The table was designed to be written on, teacher Ali McMahon told me. "We use the table as a way to think out complex ideas," she said. With a white board tabletop everyone sees the ideas and adds to them.

I recently visited Northstar Middle School in Eau Claire.

My first contact with students and teacher at the school was in the hallway. They were sitting on the floor with a globe and a basketball.

"Our basketball is an awfully small sun," the teacher told me.

The lesson was about the solar system. The students in a darkened classroom were a-buzz with activity, learning by doing with lights, with balls and with iPads.

The excitement in the room was palpable. Students were eager to share what they learned.

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How they saw the full moon the night before and, using a light and a Styrofoam ball, showed me the phases of the moon. "Imagine me as the earth," one youngster joked.

The Northstar students are known as the Polars – their mascot is the polar bear. Therefore, it was only fitting the teacher and the students are part of the ARCTIC Zone.

ARCTIC (Authentic Real-world Curriculum & Technology-Infused Classroom) is part of an inventive approach to education in the Eau Claire School District.

The approach, Principal Timothy Skutley explained to me, is an innovative way to teach sixth graders. Originating with the school board's Learning Environments and Partnerships Committee (LEAP) and begun this fall, the ARCTIC Zone breaks down barriers for learning. Math, science and reading comprehension might all be learned in the same lesson.

The "soft" skills – collaboration, self-motivation, problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, communication – are learned in an environment where students set goals, learn at their own pace, and work with others to achieve.

Students stay on track with many different methods of assessment built into their school day. For example, "must-dos" are tasks that must be accomplished. Short assessments follow on-line "lessons". Each student keeps track of his or her progress in an on-line system.

"We seek to balance innovation and accountability," Dr. Mary Ann Hardebeck, Eau Claire's Superintendent, explained.

Innovation is happening in more than just the ARCTIC zone. I visited the Career and Technical Education Lab. What was called "shop" in my school days has evolved into a laboratory of discovery. Students were learning physics, applied mathematics, materials science and engineering all at the same time. Best yet, they were working with their hands to create something new. I had heard about a 3-D printer. Now I saw two in action.

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Students and teachers, school leaders and community members are reimagining public education. And they are bringing legislators along to see what a reimagined, reengineered learning environment looks like.

Lawmakers were invited by Mike Haynes of CESA 10 to view Most Likely to Succeed a documentary encouraging innovation in education.

Our education system is a product of history. Much of what us “oldsters” learned came about in an effort to train 20th-century workers for 20th-century jobs.

However, the world has changed. “Just Google it” has become part of our vernacular when we need to search for answers to questions. Technology dominates much of our activities.

What a 21st century world needs is people who can think critically, evaluate and communicate, who can work together to create something new. We need outside-the-box doers to tackle increasingly complex problems and to be intrinsically motivated to persist in problem solving. And we need life-long learners who view education as fun and worthwhile.

I’m enthusiastic about reimagining education. Rep. Kathy Bernier and I are planning to bring Most Likely to Succeed to the Capitol to view with our legislative colleagues.

Wisconsin needs a vision of what a reimagined education system might look like and how we might take steps to achieve it. Let’s begin such a discussion.