

Curriculum Corner by:
Dr. Matthew J. Murphy, Chief Education Officer, Ramsey and Dr. Richard N. Wiener,
Director of Curriculum, Ramsey School District

“A Positive Impact on Children”

In *Most Likely to Succeed*, best-selling authors and education experts Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith, call for a complete overhaul of American schools. While there is a part of me that wishes I had that power, (which as we all know I don't), I do know that as a superintendent I can control certain aspects of education, including the form and function of a curriculum. That may sound counterintuitive as we are living in the era of too many mandates, i.e., CCSS, PARCC, etc., but we still have the ability, and more importantly, the responsibility to produce a curriculum that reflects our community's values and our district's vision for what we want our students to experience in the classroom.

Beginning in 2008-09, the Ramsey administrative team led by Dr. Richard Wiener conducted a long-term research study to identify the knowledge and skills students would need to be competitive and successful in a changing global and technological society. This work resulted in a goal statement that identified ten educational outcomes that the administrative team considered essential for all Ramsey students (**insert link to *A Ramsey Student Will***). An intensive district-wide professional development effort ensued that focused on developing the cornerstone competency of critical thinking. In addition, every building and department initiated curriculum projects that promoted and fostered the *Ramsey Student Will* outcomes. Examples included elementary STEM units, middle school “habits of mind” performance assessments, new AP courses and electives, and a Global Nomads project. In the years leading to 2014-15, the staff was trained in the design of performance assessments to measure 21st century competencies, technology integration through an iPad Initiative, and 21st century instruction through workshops and courses taught by teachers and supervisors in the Ramsey Education Academy of Learning. An aggressive training program in K-6 language arts (and mathematics starting September, 2015) will add considerably to the quality of instruction in these areas. A new high school course on “design thinking” will provide an opportunity to explore a new paradigm of instructional practices.

An important step forward came in the summer of 2014, when the district embarked on a large-scale revision of curriculum. A new format for designing curriculum units was instituted to ensure that rigorous content, the 21st century competencies (*A Ramsey Student Will*), and performance assessments were an integral part of every unit of study throughout the district. This process continued at the 2015 Summer Curriculum Writing

Institute, where 50 teachers from all grade levels and all of the subject supervisors worked on 21st century unit redesign.

Another turning point came this summer, when the administrators and supervisors met to address the next phase of implementation, assessment of the new units of study with a focus on instructional practices. The changes that our district has instituted these past few years in curriculum, instruction, and assessment have been significant. The changes we are making in Ramsey are NOT superficial. They represent a tectonic shift in teaching and learning. The units that we have designed ensure rigorous, challenging learning experiences that reflect the demands of a changing society. To assess the quality of the new units and to ensure optimal outcomes, the administrative team, at the summer retreat, developed a “Pedagogy Framework” that specifies the “learning conditions” that are necessary to ensure that the *Ramsey Student Will* outcomes are realized.

Through a very intensive, collaborative three-day process based on the Design Thinking model, the administrative team developed a draft “pedagogy framework” that will guide the observation and assessment of the new curriculum units. The Framework will be at the forefront of the “instructional rounds” process, which will provide a structure for analyzing and improving classroom instruction. The process the administrative team engaged in at the retreat provided an excellent opportunity to share knowledge and insights, raise important professional questions, and develop a coherent vision of the kind of quality curriculum, instruction, and assessment we expect in Ramsey.

In developing the “Pedagogy Framework,” the administrative team targeted three key “classroom conditions” that optimize learning outcomes. Briefly, these conditions are:

Student-Centered Classroom

Students lead the learning process; the teacher is facilitator and coach. Students are active, self-directed, and take initiative. They collaborate, ask questions, and solve complex, authentic problems. They use technology to access resources and learn from others on a global scale. They pursue interests and passions, are creative and innovative, and feel safe and secure to take risks and learn from failure. The *Ramsey Student Will* outcomes are intentional and an integral part of lesson design. The learning environment supports individual differences. Students are engaged and enjoy and value learning.

Performance-Based Assessments

Students actively demonstrate the ability to transfer content and skills to new problems and situations. Students are engaged in “core performances” (What you know is less important than what you can do with what you know.) Students work collaboratively to determine which content and skills apply to a new learning situation. Academic challenges foster and test dispositions such as persistence,

initiative, and risk-taking, as students engage in authentic, real-world, open-ended problem-solving. The *Ramsey Student Will* outcomes are intentional and an integral part of assessment design.

Student Growth

ALL students are given the opportunity and support needed to maximize their potential in a learning culture that is flexible, respects differences, and has a “growth mind-set.” Instruction is differentiated and co-teaching is an integral part of the support system. Attention is given to academic, personal, and social/emotional goals. Multiple data sources, alternate assessments, flexible grouping, and UDL strategies are utilized to support students’ unique needs and learning styles. Students are encouraged and challenged to problem-solve, take risks, utilize technology, self-monitor, set goals, and reflect on feedback.

While this endeavor is still a work in process and not yet as radical as Tony Wagner calls for, it is a great example of what a vision that is embedded with a core set of values and a team of committed educators can accomplish. As Joe Carroll stated, “Nothing, absolutely nothing has happened in education until it has happened to a student.” Our job as school leaders is to make sure everything we do, starting with our curriculum, is aimed at having a positive impact on children.