'Design thinking' provides a real education for Kentucky school district

BY LINDA B. BLACKFORD
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To get more students to eat lunch on campus, Eminence made the cafeteria look like a restaurant and added interactive screens so the space also can be used as a classroom. **HERALD-LEADER**

EMINENCE — At Eminence Independent School, elementary students walk through halls painted like Disney storefronts and, during lunch, glide through a tube slide that drops down into the cafeteria.

Half the high school students travel to Bellarmine College in Louisville two days a week to take college classes. When teachers worried about lost time traveling, Eminence officials created the first Wi-Fi bus, so students could use their school laptops while traveling to and from classes.

The K-12 school in Henry County isn't big enough to have separate computer labs, so every table in the cafeteria is outfitted with a flatscreen and computer hookups. And when teachers, staff or students need to solve a problem, they head up to a smartboard laboratory, where everyone plugs in their computers and works out a solution.

Eminence has a new lease on life, says Superintendent Buddy Berry, and it's about, to quote Steve Jobs, "surprise and delight" in every day of the school year.

"We literally evaluated our entire school district, and said it's not working for us, for our students, and we think that's symptomatic," Berry said.

He gives a lot of credit to John Nash, a professor at the University of Kentucky College of Education who runs the Laboratory on Design Thinking in Education. Berry went to a conference in 2011 held by Nash on "design thinking," which has been used for several decades by businesses and other organizations.

At its most simple, design thinking is about making decisions with empathy, or with the needs of those affected in mind.

At Eminence, that meant interviewing every student, teacher and staff member about what they wanted to make school more meaningful.

"It was bigger than adding a single program or a new class; we literally went out and redesigned the entire process," Berry said.

Asking people affected by change to be part of the process seems more than obvious, not like something that needs to be explained by a Ph.D. But Berry and others say it's not the way things work in public education, where edicts come down from on high to a captive audience of teachers and students. And with the pressures of Kentucky's state testing system, the idea of "surprise and delight" is often left out of the equation.

Design thinking might be obvious, but it has gotten some educators and students very excited.

Enthusiasm for school

At Lexington's Bryan Station High School, some people say design thinking will transform the school.

"In the past, we've found pre-existing prototypes and make them fit with our schools rather than focusing on what we need," said Stacey Middleton, the school's data specialist who oversees its 70-member design team.

In Bryan Station's case, that prototype was block scheduling, which a few decades ago was hailed as the next big thing to reform high school education. Ninety-minute blocks would allow for longer, better instruction, more science labs, more discussion, easier scheduling. It had worked other places, so it would work at Bryan Station, where it was adopted in 2003.

In reality, it got very boring for students, tough for teachers and inflexible for everyone.

So Nash explained design thinking to teachers and students there, and next year, Bryan Station will start a schedule with shorter units and more flexibility. But design thinking has had a much deeper effect, Middleton said.

"It's so much more important than a schedule — you're teaching people to use their minds and come up with ideas, and get empathy for the people they're affecting to come up with some wonderful solutions," she said. "That life skill is more important that any content I could teach."

The new schedule has many modules that can be put together for longer classes, or shorter ones to work with teachers, hold study halls or for students to mentor one another.

"This is going to create more enthusiasm for school because you'll have more time to process and comprehend it," said James Conley, a Bryan Station senior and design team member.

Students also will have more flexibility to tailor their schedule to their interests, Middleton said.

"We want kids to explore their passions and we want them to be prepared to explore whatever those are when they leave here," she said. "I think that's what the design team has really been about."

Mind-set of empowerment

Nash spent nearly a decade at Stanford University, where design thinking was studied and implemented. He then started a private company to help nonprofits use the method, but academia called again. In 2011, he ended up at UK as a professor and head of the Next Generation Leadership Academy.

While training future leaders, he started to ponder how design thinking could be applied in schools.

"The people who are most affected by design thinking in schools are kids, but they are usually never part of the solution of how schools can be run to be more meaningful," Nash said.

Design thinking follows a standard pattern: Define the problem. Brainstorm radical solutions. Find prototypes of solutions. Get feedback on how it works. Fix problems before implementation.

Also, don't spend a lot of time talking about how something won't work.

That's what happened to Buddy Berry in Eminence. When various telecommunications companies said a Wi-Fi bus couldn't work, his

transportation director got the necessary devices and welded them into the bus.

"It's consistently a mind-set of empowerment," Berry said.

The new Eminence logo, "School on FIRE," stands for Framework of Innovation for Reinventing Education, but a lot of it is based on what the district's 700 kids wanted.

When Berry and his team interviewed every student, the elementary kids said they wanted the school to look more like Disney. Hence the new hallways and slide.

The school also added a student to the site-based council, which state law created to bring a voice to teachers and parents.

Instruction is based on the state's curriculum but not the statewide test.

As Berry explains it, when surprise and delight are your mantra, you worry about creativity, not test scores. At Eminence, they've stopped worrying about test scores, and test scores are rising.

Technology also plays a big role. On a recent weekday, Chloe Stivers, Jade Price and Abigail Tingle sat in the hall, three heads bent over an iPad. They were researching the cost of wind turbines and other alternative energy.

"Then we're going to write a play about it for our class," Stivers explained.

At the high school level, students take core classes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. On Tuesday and Thursday, about half the 175 students go to Bellarmine; the others work on online elective classes, catch up with homework and get one-on-one mentoring with teachers.

English teacher Cora Puckett has been at Eminence eight years. Despite a huge overhaul in one year, she likes the changes.

"In certain ways, they are much more engaged," she said of the students. "Kids can work at their own pace. It's getting rid of the model of waiting on the kid next to me."

Senior Bre Armstrong likes the schedule because she found five days of lectures and coursework too much. "I needed a break; now I can go to teachers for more help," she said.

Her friend Marissa Bailey added: "Now school is more something you want to do, rather than what you have to do. It's less of a chore."

Read more here: http://www.kentucky.com/2014/01/05/3019634_design-thinking-provides-a-real.html?rh=1#storylink=cpy