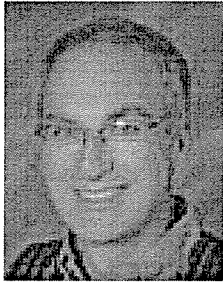




Gary Plano



Mike Radow

"We live in a 21st century world where jobs can be shipped wherever there's an internet connection; where a child born in Dallas is competing with children born in Delhi; and where your best job qualification is not what you do, but what you know." President Barack Obama

Teaching for the 21st century: Mercer Island's 2020 vision

Mercer Island School

District, a suburban district located in the center of Lake Washington, just 10 minutes from downtown Seattle, is, by all standard measures, the highest achieving district in the state of Washington. Our students score at the top of the state's Washington State Assessment for Student Learning, 95% of our high school graduates go on to college, and colleges and universities consistently report that Mercer Island graduates are better prepared for post-secondary studies. Still, despite our success, many Mercer Island parents continue to send their children to private schools saying that these schools are better able to meet their children's needs and some of our high school students are making risky personal choices.

We realized that our past success would have little bearing on future achievement unless we made some effort to address 21st century realities. Nearly two years ago a group of committed parents and long-time advocates for public education approached us with the idea of creating a "Really Big Idea" to transform our 20th century schools. This "big idea" would not only be a model for what is possible in public education, but would ensure that Mercer Island students "are ready to contribute to and succeed in

the global community."

We held numerous focus group sessions, many fascinating discussions about what this "big idea" might look like and assurances that with the right idea, the community would step forward with significant support for public schools. Daniel Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind*, spoke to a packed audience of parents, teachers and community members recently about the need to educate students to be "designers, inventors, teachers, storytellers – creative and emphatic "right brain" thinkers whose abilities mark the line between who gets ahead and who doesn't." (Pink, 2006)

And yet, no matter how big the idea and how much support we receive from our community, change will not happen without teachers. Deep substantive transformation is hard. Teachers need time to meet, share feedback, and to create lessons aimed at Pink's new emphasis. Yet teachers are often skeptical of change, especially here in a district where new initiatives have seemed to come and go with each new superintendent. Furthermore, since the advent of No Child Left Behind, the focus on accountability, standards, and 'one size fits all' education model has stifled much inventiveness. Teachers have repeatedly claimed that

teaching to students' individual passions and interests is impossible in a climate where everything is held up to a test.

To make matters worse, last spring Washington State Governor Christine Gregoire announced that the state faced a \$9 billion deficit for 2009-2010. Cuts to the Mercer Island School District budget were significant. We were challenged to balance the budget, much less fund any large-scale transformation or expand teacher development. Even so, the students in front of us will be entering a world that requires them to view themselves – and us to support them as academic entrepreneurs and risk-takers. We owe them a world-class education regardless of the economic climate.

If we want students to take risks, the adults in the system must model that behavior as well. At our annual staff luncheon at the beginning of the year, staff heard from their superintendent and association president that they not only had permission, but encouragement to experiment with ideas intended to engage students with the world they will inherit. We know that standardized tests don't necessarily measure the skills our students need. As President Obama said, "We can't simply measure whether students can fill in a bubble on a test, but whether

they possess 21st century skills like problem-solving and critical thinking, entrepreneurship and creativity.”

The paradigm for 21st century learning has become our “2020 Vision: Successfully preparing students for the cognitive, global and digital world.” The Mercer Island School Board officially adopted this vision in the summer of 2008 and all district improvement - planning initiatives are being examined under this light. Mercer Island schools will deliver a 21st century education that prepares students to convert information into knowledge and create innovative solutions demanded by tomorrow’s world.

Some of the ways Mercer Island schools are engaging students in 21st century learning include:

The Mercer Trading Company —

Mercer Island High School students are collaborating with Saint Augustine’s College in Ghana to set up an online trading company to buy and sell goods from the United States and Ghana. The students have formed a corporation, sold stock, written a mission statement and by-laws and split the company into departments. As one student said, “We chose Ghana because we wanted to learn more about Africa and give our proceeds back to the people there. Right now the United States does not import goods from Ghana. Maybe we will be the first!”

Ecosystems of Puget Sound

A team of elementary teachers is using the Internet to support students in sharing what they learn about Puget Sound with a global community. “As our students study the ecosystem of Puget Sound they learn about marine life (plants and animals), the food web, and how their actions impact the health of the sound.”

Geocaching

Students learn about geography and orienteering through hands-on experience. Teachers use a “Travel Bug” to allow the students to watch their item travel around the country and even the world. This activity is tracked on-line. The students will be connecting with people from other areas by reading the logs people create about our Travel Bug. This is an exciting way for technology to help connect young students to the outside world.

Voice Thread teen tutoring program

This project utilizes the Voice Thread computer program to create a teen-tutoring program in the Mercer Island School District whereby students who are proficient in a subject can assist one who may need help. For example, high school students assist elementary or middle school students on a daily, weekly or monthly basis.

Modernizing the new social studies offerings

A team of social studies teachers are researching and designing up to ten problem-based learning experiences to be used as a framework for the new 9th grade Global History course and the second semester of the new 10th Grade World History course. These learning experiences include a career exploration element in order to make the projects authentic and open-ended. An example is, “Imagine that you are a museum curator. Design an exhibit around the art and inventions of Leonardo Da Vinci.” Following the development and implementation of these lessons, the Social Studies department will evaluate the appropriateness and success of the assignments with the goal of choosing several common assessments for the 2009-2010 school year and beyond.

Music Commission Project

Mercer Island High School’s band director has contracted with a young professional composer named Carl Holmquist to compose a piece after meeting with and discussing compositional ideas and process with the students and directors of regional high schools in Washington state. The project includes two “webinars” in which MIHS students actively rehearse the piece for the composer who is in turn available over the web to answer questions about the piece and its development. Mr. Holmquist will come to Mercer Island to rehearse the band and conduct the world premier of his piece.

ActivExpressions

Elementary teachers are using the ActivExpressions interactive response systems in their classrooms for individual student use and interaction with the Activboard. It is a unique learner response system with the ability to text complete sentences and numerical responses.

Voices of the Congo

Students in International Studies and Drama at Mercer Island High School are collaborating on researching the current conflict in Congo and are writing and producing an original drama based on first-hand accounts of participants in that conflict. The classes together will utilize videoconferencing technology to dialogue directly with persons involved in the conflict and to gather their stories. Students will also use digital technologies such as wikis to build their understanding of the conflict, and in collaborating in script development.

Our success depends on our community’s willingness to be ambitious and take risks with us. We want our students to discover their passion, design their own academic path and take responsibility for it. We expect students to view themselves and be supported as academic entrepreneurs and risk-takers. We need to acknowledge many paths to success and encourage each student to find his or hers.

We have embarked on a fascinating journey. We expect this journey to evolve as we learn and grown from these experiences. After all we are a school, committed to the growth, expanded awareness and ability of ALL the individuals in the system.

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