

Fraser schools transform to 21st century learning

By Frank DeFrank, The Macomb Daily

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Nearly five years ago, Fraser Public Schools voters narrowly approved a bond issue, a large portion of which was earmarked to finance district-wide technology upgrades.

On Friday, district officials took a few minutes to show off how some of that money was used. The district unveiled a video created in cooperation with the Tri-County Alliance that will showcase Fraser's efforts to other districts in southeastern Michigan.

"I think the greatest benefit for us as a school district has been the opportunity to redesign our classrooms and think about what kids really need to learn every day, and provide every student with an opportunity to have that individual learning experience," said David Richards, Fraser superintendent.

"The technology for us has really closed that digital gap so that every kid is equipped with the resources to be successful academically."

In the winter of 2011, in the midst of economic upheaval nationwide, Fraser officials sought approval of a \$19.9 million bond issue. It was a tough sell, Richards recalled.

"We really had to spend a lot of time talking about the 'why,'" he said.

Voters bought in, and in February approved the bond issue by a 52.5-47.5 percent margin.

Since then, Fraser has transformed learning to what it calls a 21st century classroom equipped with the latest in computer technology and teachers trained to guide students through a new way to learn.

"It's a journey to reinvent public education," Richards said.

For example: Every Fraser student in grades 3 through 12 now receives an electronic tablet computer for the year. Students bring the devices to back and forth to school, so they essentially have access to them 24 hours a day.

Children in younger grades also have access to computers while at school.

But learning multiplication tables via a computer as opposed to old-fashioned flash cards doesn't define 21st century learning.

“We’re in a different age,” said Chris Stanley, a Fraser High School teacher designated as one of the district’s 21st century teachers.

Stanley used an example to illustrate.

For many years, students were required to memorize the periodic chart of the elements. It was staple of many science courses.

But today, the identity of the 16th element (sulphur) is easily accessible. So the memorization is fruitless. A more practical application, perhaps, is the effect of sulphur on health or the environment.

“We’re beyond the information age,” Stanley said. “Now we’re looking at what to do with all that information.”

Another 21st century teacher, Kristi Skladanowski, said the technology provides valuable tools for learning, but the focus remains on learning itself.

“I say it over and over,” he said. “It’s not about the devices. It’s about the kids learning.”

Fraser isn’t alone in its transformation to technology-driving learning. Many school districts employ the same devices and same approaches to teaching students in 2014.

Richards hopes even more have similar opportunities.

“Somehow we have to figure out a way where every kid has the opportunity,” he said.

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