Delivering World-Class Education on the Range

The Rock Ridge School District is undergoing a transformation. Created by the merger of two ancient rival districts—the Eveleth-Gilbert and Virginia school districts—the citizens of both old school districts have voted to build a new high school and two new elementary schools. The citizens of both school districts also voted to consolidate the two school districts into one. This is the first newly consolidated school district in the State of Minnesota for the past 15 years. And it is probably one of the rarest school consolidations which has occurred not because of financial struggles—both school districts were in solid financial shape—but because of genuine interest to improve the quality of education the students were receiving. In other words, the communities buried their parochial armor and gunpowder and decided to look to the future for their kids and grandkids. The communities cared less about their mascots and colors and slogans and sports history and more about transforming education.

Wow.

Here is what this means for the students who are and will be attending the Rock Ridge schools. We are designing the new schools and education around the 21st century skills of Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, Creativity, Citizenship, Character, Entrepreneurship, and Global Competence. Our goal is to have the benchmarking standard of “Best in the World,” while using simple but powerful statements such as, “Education to inspire the next generation,” and “Fiercely United,” and “Rock Ridge Rising,” and “Helping students find their magnificent obsession,” as terms to express ways of thinking about things.

How we view things makes all the difference between success and failure. To that end, here is what we are not striving for. We are not striving to reflect statements such as, “We’re okay.” Or “Could be worse.” Or “At least we’re better than (fill in the blank with the name of another school district).” These are Trojan horse comparisons. In the world of life, our students’ real competition will not be other students on the Range. Rather, the competition will be with other students from around the world and the United States—China, Russia, Alabama, Brazil, Texas, France, Germany, California, South Africa, Kenya, Massachusetts, Japan, etc. And if you don’t believe me, you haven’t been paying attention to world economic trends over the past 30 years. Just ask any manager who runs a manufacturing company and ask who her customers and competitors are. You might be surprised.

This is why we are building a new high school designed around Career Academies. The reality is that unless you are one of the lucky few to be born rich, the vast majority of us will be going to work for much of our lives. And if this is true, shouldn’t we help our students make better decisions about their future? Shouldn’t we be giving our students hands-on projects relative to fields which interest them? Shouldn’t we be giving our students actual contact with real people who work in the field rather than waiting for students to “figure it out in college?” The world is full of students who changed majors in their sophomore or junior year of college and suddenly found themselves thousands of dollars in debt with no marketable skills. Can’t we design a better system?

At Rock Ridge, we believe we can.

The foundation of our Rock Ridge K-12 system is shifting to a culture of thinking, in which students will need to actually think during the school day. And by thinking I don’t mean filling out simple worksheets and looking up answers in a textbook—I mean actually thinking about and making predictions, simulations, doing analysis, and solving problems on their own.

Imagine that.

The reality is that many students go to school every day and do very little thinking—national studies bear this out. For example, on a national basis, in the elementary school, about 76% of the students will be engaged in the material presented by the teacher. However, by the time students are in the high school, this level of engagement drops to 44%. And the number of questions asked by students drops from nearly 100% in the early elementary to an abysmal 25% in the high school. Neither of these are good trends.

To counteract these disturbing national trends, at Rock Ridge we are shifting to more project-based, hands-on, relevant learning. This still involves traditional teaching methods and whole class instruction. Because, after all, we can’t tell students to make a prediction about something they know nothing about. This is where many schools go wrong. They assume that once freed of the shackles of the teacher, students will magically solve problems of which they know nothing about. This doesn’t work. It is a waste of time to spend a considerable amount of time trying to solve a problem in which you know little to nothing. This is called a pooling of ignorance. The key is to do the right amount of whole class instruction with the right amount of group instruction and the right amount of individual and small group teaching. This is why effective teaching is so hard.

To design a culture of thinking, we will need to embrace failure. It is only through failure that any of us really learn anything. Most adults who are highly skilled in their jobs were probably not very good when they started. In fact, they probably failed more often than they succeeded. But the key to success is picking yourself up from failure and readjusting your learning and trying again. Nobody does it perfectly the first time. This means at Rock Ridge we need a culture of failure, where students learn that it is okay to fail and not be good at things the first time they try them. But through persistence and thinking about what we are trying to learn, we will get better. Sometimes we sugar coat things too much with our kids and tell them how easy things will be. This isn’t true and learning is often hard work. We are better off preparing our students to fail and teaching them how to learn from failure so they can readjust and propel themselves to spiraling heights of success.

An important part of a focus on the Career Academy and project based learning is the design process. The design process has been around for years and is not new. The design process is also applicable to all subjects and problems. (It just isn’t thought of often in this way.) We need a design process because students need to be taught a way to think about solving problems. It doesn’t work to simply tell a student to “think it through,” and hope a dash of fairy dust intervenes.
and the light bulb comes on and a miracle occurs and the student ends up with a brilliant product. In farming country, where I grew up, it is called “hogwash.”

For those who want to know, the design process typically includes giving the student a challenging problem or question, then having sustained inquiry to understand the problem or question, followed by a real-world application of the problem or question, which includes some student voice and choice, which then is followed by reflection, which leads to a planned and orderly critique and revision of what went right and what went wrong. Ultimately, there is some type of product which is more public than just the student.

Along this journey Rock Ridge is committed, even fanatically I appropriately say, to paying attention to neuroscience, how the brain really learns, and what educational researchers have discovered works and doesn’t work. Lots of educational practices in America continue which are not based in much research or brain research. They continue because that is what has been done for the last 50 or 100 years in education.

For example, did you know that if young students have trouble reading, telling them to read more books is probably bad advice because what they should be doing is probably working on their phonics? And that traditional, once-a-week spelling tests are mostly useless in actually improving, long-term, a students’ spelling ability? (I’m sorry English teachers, but the research is very weak on the value of traditional spelling lists.) And that listening to a lecture for 45 minutes is one of the worst ways to remember information? And that telling students to take notes is mostly a futile task unless the teacher specifically teaches the students how to take notes? The list is endless, but you get the point.

Let’s actually pay attention to what the educational researchers and neuroscientists are saying.

At Rock Ridge, we also believe in the value of inquiry and questioning. (And by the way, the educational researchers and neuroscientists also agree.) We know that helping students actually think is the key to everything. This means having students teach concepts to other students. (Note: Teaching concepts to others is one of the best ways to remember what we have learned.) This means having students explain out loud, step-by-step, how they got their answer. This means involving students in small groups that have spirited intellectual conversations based on actual evidence, not what they heard through the grapevine or playground. Or what they want to be true.

To this end, the social and emotional skills of our students are critical. No significant learning can occur if our Rock Ridge students aren’t confident, can’t advocate for themselves, can’t learn from failure, can’t learn how to control their emotions, and can’t learn how to work with other students, teachers, and future employers. The number one reason why adults get fired from the world of work has nothing to do with their intelligence or knowledge about the work they are performing. It is because they have poor social and emotional skills and can’t work with other people. Maybe we should be paying attention to our students’ social and emotional skills?

There are other big components which are being integrated into the K-12 educational program at Rock Ridge. We are using many AVID strategies, including WICOR, which intentionally includes more writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization, and reading in all classrooms. And with more intentionality. For example, everyone knows that elementary kids do lots of reading. But what are they reading? Are they reading only funny nonsensical picture books? (Which, I admit, everyone should have.) Or are they also reading and learning about the Roman Empire and how they constructed the aqueducts? Are they reading about genetics and how simple pea plants changed how we think about genetics? Are they reading about the immigrants to Northeast Minnesota and where they came from and why they left their homeland for a foreign land?

You get the picture. And yes--elementary students can handle all of these topics.

Through backwards design--beginning with the end in mind--or portrait of a graduate--at Rock Ridge we are working to create an educational environment which is conducive to exemplary learning while giving students real skills they will actually need in the future. Both in the home and at work.

The future is here. And the time is now. At Rock Ridge we are excited about the prospects for our students and our communities. Stay tuned for more details. The new Eveleth-Gilbert elementary school opens in the fall of 2022. The new Career Academy High School opens in the fall of 2023. And the new Virginia elementary school opens in the fall of 2024. We can hardly wait. But even more important than the buildings are the teaching transformations and ways of learning for students which are happening along the way. A building is just a building. But with the Rock Ridge teachers and staff, these new buildings are going to absolutely rock and roll.

Dr. Noel Schmidt, Superintendent