Swan Valley Students Inspired by Real-World Learning Opportunities

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ON THE COVER:
By engaging the students to support every aspect of Swan Valley High School’s library media center, Superintendent Matt McRae has offered the entire school community an inspirational space to focus on real-world learning.

Cover Photo by Mitch Smith
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Inspire verb/ in-spire Definition: to make someone want to do something: to give (someone) an idea about what to do or create.

The 2015-16 theme for the MASA Leader and conferences has been **Inspire, Connect, and Equip**. These are three extremely important areas that district leaders must keep in front of them daily. I have written about **Connecting** and **Equipping** in previous editions of this magazine, and as we close out yet another school year, my column will focus on the leadership trait of **Inspire**.

**Inspiring** is one of those “other duties as assigned” areas in our job description. It just seems to come with the territory, and all effective leaders with whom I have worked over the years do this quite naturally. In our positions, we are charged with inspiring many different categories of people including (but not limited to):

**Children:** There are many different ways to **inspire** the children who attend our school districts, whether it is unexpectedly visiting a classroom, attending a concert, play, or athletic event, interacting with them over social media, giving remarks at a pep rally or an all-school assembly, or by simply giving a child some one-on-one attention as we walk through the halls. Children look up to us, and we are in the perfect position to **inspire** those who are the future of tomorrow. What an honor!

**Staff:** Modeling quality instructional leadership, making difficult and courageous decisions, being visible at events where staff is present, providing quality supervision to administrators in order to help them grow, and always representing those who work for the district in a positive light in the community are all ways to **inspire** our staff who are watching us to see how we lead on a daily basis.

**Board of Education:** Inspiring this important group is so critical and can be accomplished by providing continuous informational updates so that there are no surprises, handling ourselves with grace and courage while under fire by the public at a board meeting, helping bring a board to consensus over a difficult issue, always representing the district in a professional manner, working hard (and smart), and doing our best to lead a balanced personal and professional life. **Inspiring** others is contagious, and astute board members will notice when this is being accomplished.

**Community and District Partners:** Being appropriately accessible, working in a genuinely collaborative manner, being that go-to leader when there are questions about the school district, being communicative about what is going on in the district (including positives and areas for improvement), taking a leadership role in the community, and actively listening to input from these individuals and groups—can all lead towards us being seen as a leader who **inspires** with this important audience.

Being able to **inspire** is not necessarily a learned trait, but a result of all that we do on a constant basis. Let us continue to lead to **inspire** others, even though it might not officially be on top of our everyday to-do list!

**Chris**
It’s that time of year when you may ask yourself: Is it the end of the school year already? The answer, of course, is yes. The signs are everywhere, most notably in the arrival of spring sports.

It’s wonderful when our baseball and track teams win, of course. But it’s just as gratifying to see the kids play their hearts out, keep their chins up, and persevere even when the odds are against them. That’s how you know they’re true champions.

As leaders we know that our teachers, principals, and staff take the same purposeful approach to their vital, day-to-day work—and for that we are so thankful.

It’s been quite a year. We have experienced new challenges and opportunities, such as third-grade reading, a 60-day gag order, a school zone speed limit, concealed carry, and teacher/administrator professional development. We also made it through a new state assessment (SAT), new scorecards, and a new federal law (ESSA). In spite of these challenges and opportunities, we continued to make progress and do our best when the odds were against us—taking the high road, keeping our chins up, and persevering when the focus became about adults and not students.

There is no doubt that we have worked hard this school year to dramatically improve an environment where learning can occur for students and staff. And through our setbacks and successes we grew just enough to do it all over again next year. That’s how you know that superintendents are true champions.

So as this 2015-2016 school year draws to a close, I hope that you can look back to an eventful and successful nine months. Looking forward, I wish you a great summer of planning for the 2016-17 school year.
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“The war between natives and immigrants is ending. The natives have won. It was a bloodless conflict fought not with bullets and spears, but with iPhones and floppy disks. Now the battle between the haves and have-nots can begin. The post-millennial ‘digital native,’ a term coined by U.S. author Marc Prensky in 2001 is emerging as the globe’s dominant demographic, while the ‘digital immigrant,’ becomes a relic of a previous time.”

— Oliver Joy, CNN.com article

Public schools in Monroe County are no strangers to the term “digital natives.” We provide technology to prepare our students for the 21st century and work to help them possess technology fluency when they graduate from high school.

It is our responsibility as educators to implement innovative initiatives that prepare students for success in a global digital workplace. By using a mixture of traditional teaching and digital technologies, Monroe County students will be better prepared for the post-secondary education and the workplace. The public schools in Monroe County create student-centric learning environments that empower students to learn the curriculum, as well as to become innovators, leading to a more educated and global citizenry.

In his book The World Is Flat, Thomas Friedman talks about how the flattening of the world is causing a shift toward a web-enabled level playing field where only the tech-savvy are competitive. According to Michael Golden in an article in T.H.E. Journal from July 2006:

Today’s educational system bears the responsibility of preparing a new generation for a changing workforce. Where the move was once from agricultural to industrial, and then from industrial to technological, the great transition now is from local technology to global information. Our high school students are poised to enter the global marketplace or to continue their education beyond K-12, and we must ready them for a flat world in which competition for jobs and higher education is fierce.

Karl Fisch posted the following statement on his blog, The Fischbowl: “We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist, using technologies that haven’t been invented, in order to solve problems, we don’t even know are problems yet.”

Our job as educators is to create 21st-century citizens, and technology provides the tools necessary to help us reinvent our schools to be adaptable in a world that is changing at a blinding rate. Technology is the great equalizer!

Our schools start with a progressive pedagogy that recognizes the role of schools has changed, and that our role now is to help students navigate an ever-changing world, and to help them have the skills they need to adapt, create, judge, synthesize, and analyze. Our job has to be about teaching students to become critical consumers and producers of the information around them. We can’t assume that we have all the answers. We teach students to take a core set of skills and find rich, powerful answers. This happens all day, every day in our schools. When we invite the world in, rather than shut it out, we create communities and institutions that are real and authentic. The availability of technology in our classrooms provides the tools necessary for our students to compete in a global economy and create a culture that is rapidly becoming more transparent and collaborative because of these new technologies.

We are, and always have been, tasked with helping our students develop the literacy skills, context of knowledge, and practical experiences so that they can prosper in their future. However, just as the global marketplace continually changes, so do our students’ information landscapes. Without a new 21st-century skill-set and experiential learning knowledge base, success will most certainly be out of reach.

Our schools reflect the world we live in today, and through the use of technology we embrace adaptability so that we can prepare for the world we will live in tomorrow.

Dr. Stephen McNew is in his second year as the Superintendent of the Monroe County Intermediate School District after spending the previous 12 years as the Assistant Superintendent for curriculum and instruction. His passion is how technology enhances teaching and learning. Contact him at 734.242.5799 or stephen.mcnew@monroecisd.org.
Winning and losing: Is that what life is all about? Is our destiny determined by how many wins we have under our belts? Is this what is important in life?

To many of our students, the answer to all three of these questions is, “Yes.” As adults, we know, that simply isn’t true. True leadership and success are determined by how we handle situations, persevere through those challenges, reflect on what went right, and change what went wrong. As we continue to evolve through this process, we become stronger and more confident as adults and leaders.

As we live life, we experience many things. Some of these things are great, and some are not. Life happens around us and to us, every day. Adversity surrounds us and our students. As educators, we can give our students the tools to deal with that adversity. If we are going to change our schools and our communities, we need to start with our young people.

Adversity on the Field
A year ago, during a football practice, a student from my district got into a fight. When the coach pulled that student aside to deal with the situation, emotions came spilling out. The frustration was not the other child, but the fight was the result of other factors going on in that student’s life. The student felt he had no one to help him. His perception was, “I’m alone in the world and have to do it all on my own.”
The coach helped that child through his struggle by spinning the situation into a learning experience. At that moment, our coach recognized that our students needed to become learners before they could become leaders. That is when the concept of Students of Influence was born.

St. Louis Public Schools had a history of students who continually blamed others for their individual failures and their team failures. It was always someone else’s fault. By blaming others, looking inward didn’t happen. Looking at how we could control the outcome by changing our actions didn’t exist. Our district needed to change that if we were ever going to begin to create real leaders in our high school.

A New Partnership Develops
Phil Maxwell, a St. Louis Public Schools coach and community member, and Jennifer McKittrick, high school principal, led a select group of students through a very intentional process. They taught students how to take their mistakes and failures and turn them into opportunities. We called our group Students of Influence.

Mr. Maxwell stated, “If you want to be a leader, then you must first become a learner.” This is the key component to everything done in this group.

Learning is one of the most unappreciated gifts that everyone receives, and for many, it is wasted. People often struggle with taking their mistakes and failures and turning them into opportunities. This thought is what spurred Mr. Maxwell to work with a group of 15 young people to help them learn from their mistakes and failures. Both male and female students ranging from freshmen to juniors met every Tuesday, starting the second semester of the 2014–2015 school year. All students signed a letter of commitment, finished the class, participated in a team-building event at the end of the school year, and developed a desire to learn no matter their failures. Meetings continued during the summer to develop a mission and vision for the program.

New Opportunities for Our Students
The first set of students selected were all athletes. The second group included students who were athletes, quiet and sheltered, strong willed, and/or struggling with behavioral issues.

In both groups, there were two characteristics being sought: Demonstrating leadership and the ability to get students to follow. To be honest, sometimes this meant selecting a student with leadership qualities that were being used in a negative way. On the surface, these students may not be seen as leaders, but we saw the qualities within them. It was our job to turn that focus from negative leadership into positive leadership.

We wanted to be very intentional in creating this leadership opportunity for our students. To achieve this goal,
we created a four-year teaching plan to assist in the progression of modeling and developing our student leaders.

**Results and Future Connections**

As a result of this group, we are now developing a strategy to take this teaching to a new group of 15 in our high school, as well as to a group in our middle school. The original 15 will be learning about their strengths and how to use them to lead others, as well as teaching the middle school students what they learned this past year. We will teach the new high school group how they too can learn through their own mistakes and failures.

Our ultimate goal is to get our students to walk with others in helping them learn from their failures. We want to help young people understand that they are significant in life and that a mistake or failure does not disqualify them from being a leader or successful. In fact, the mistake or failure has the potential to make them a great person and leader for the future. This is a promising opportunity for the students at St. Louis Public Schools and our community.

Watch a video about the St. Louis Public School ‘Student of Influence’ program on the MASA Vimeo page at https://vimeo.com/gomasa/stlouis.

Kristi Teall is Superintendent of St. Louis Public Schools and a graduate of Courageous Journey Tier 2, Cohort 8. Contact her at kteall@stlouisschools.net or 989.681.5160.
Superintendents Share What Inspires Them

By Mitch Smith

What truly inspires and motivates your work? What drives you to keep charging ahead despite the enormous challenges faced in public education? Inspiration can be found everywhere, if you look deeply and closely enough.

You may find inspiration in your favorite author or on a morning walk. It will be found in whatever fills you with a sense of purpose and motivates you to achieve.

Often, it helps to talk with others in your profession. Listening to colleagues to tap ideas about what gives them inspiration can help you discover new things about yourself, and to help you thrive in your work.

MASA asked superintendents to share with the entire public education community what inspires them. They have stepped up to tell their stories, often finding the right turn of phrase, or the important example from their district to describe and share that inspiration.

The following superintendent quotes could be considered as posts on a creative inspiration board provided by colleagues across the state—educators who passionately believe in the benefits of public education.

Here’s what seven Michigan superintendents had to say about what inspires them:

**David Richards, Ph.D.**
*Fraser Public Schools*

“What inspires me as a leader is having the opportunity to rethink and to truly influence our communities around the opportunities to redesign our school districts to better meet the needs of our students. We have the opportunity each and every day to constantly be looking at practices, thinking about what students need today, and adjusting to meet those needs. That’s what inspires me.”

**Daveda J. Colbert, Ph.D.**
*Oak Park School District*

“What inspires me as a superintendent is knowing that I am truly making a difference in the lives of others. Doing what is best for students is key for me. Education is key; it’s foundational; and without it, children are limited. We must make sure all students have options and opportunities.”

**John Prescott**
*Bellevue Community Schools*

“Being a superintendent means being the educational district leader who is educating our future. The children are so important to me that I get goosebumps when I talk about them—it’s that important.”

**Thomas Parker**
*Ecorse Public Schools*

“Winning for my children is what inspires me. In a time of change, it’s the responsibility of every administrator to ensure that we keep our focus on children and make the mountains move out of the way of kids who need the opportunity to win.”

**Dr. Steve Matthews**
*Novi Community Schools*

“What inspires me is creating good learning spaces for students. I want kids to be excited about coming to school. I want kids to feel they have advocates at school who care about them and want them to be successful. My job is to create that atmosphere and environment so kids believe good things happen at school.”

**Yvonne Caamal Canul**
*Lansing School District*

“I’m inspired every single day by the fact that I have the greatest job in the world. I get to be the inspirational and instructional leader of a district with wonderful children and families in a great community.”

**Lynda Wood, Ed.D.**
*Southfield Public Schools*

“Every day what inspires me is the reality that there are children who are looking to me and our staff, as their advocates. Children depend on us to make the right choices and decisions to ensure we are doing all we can to make their future be bright and successful so they are well prepared for what lies ahead.”

It is often your work that inspires and gives a sense of purpose. You might not wake up every morning inspired, but if you are passionate about Michigan’s public schools, and its kids, you will find the inspiration to do great things.

See more video examples of Michigan’s superintendents sharing what inspires them on the MASA Vimeo channel at https://vimeo.com/gomasa.

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For me, as with many of the best educators I have known, my profession is a calling. To facilitate learning and see the light bulb of understanding come on in students is a true joy and privilege. But what I truly relish is getting students to see something much broader—their limitless potential. I also enjoy supporting the learning of fellow educators, which I did for six years as a school and district administrator and which I now do as a leader in a nonprofit that supports district and school transformation. The drive to help people of all ages become the best version of themselves profoundly inspires me to remain on my learning edge and continuously improve my own practices.

I became an educator despite the fact that the schools I attended as a child in Baltimore, Maryland, were not always nurturing. After substance abuse broke up my parents’ marriage, I moved with my mother and brother to a nearby housing project. It was not a safe place; the vast majority of young men in our part of town were caught up in a cycle of violence, substance abuse, and prison. Boys from my neighborhood were greeted by teachers with mistrust, disdain, and low expectations. For example, when I scored well on the state’s test in fourth grade, my teacher said, “We need to re-test that one; kids from the projects don’t get scores like that.” Comments like that hurt, but I did not let them deter me from continuing to push myself academically.

One of the main forces propelling me to excel in school was my mother’s example. She had been a homemaker until her marriage ended, but once she was solely responsible for my brother and me, she took on two jobs outside the home to keep us housed, fed, and clothed—refusing to accept any form of public assistance. On top of that, she put herself through school and became a diagnostic medical sonographer. I could not help but be inspired by her.

I would go on to college and learn about the societal forces that prevent vulnerable children of color from realizing their potential. It’s a complex mixture of sociology, politics, economics, and psychology, but in my mind it boils down to systems and structures that promote and reinforce low expectations. Children desperately want us to believe in them. This is especially true of vulnerable children, who often are not getting positive reinforcement at home for a complex set of reasons. High expectations inspire children to achieve things they did not know they could.

The high expectations that my mother had for me helped drive me, and I have been successful in life despite being discounted by teachers as a young student. I am living, breathing proof that a person can overcome the challenges that stem from poverty if given the proper encouragement, supports, and opportunity.

I like to think that other educators and children in poverty will find my personal story inspiring, but I work to inspire those around me in other ways as well. When I coach district and school leaders, I do it with an infectious enthusiasm. And I show examples of success so our partners will come to
know that transformation is possible. I offer 100% commitment to the success of our partners.

It pains me to say that many of the educators with whom I have worked are not used to having support as they try new strategies, fail, reflect, adjust, and try again. For example, when we at Partners in School Innovation began supporting Battle Creek Public Schools, an assistant superintendent regarded my assistance with skepticism. She asked whether I was “working an angle.” I told her that I was only interested in helping her and the students of her district succeed. After a few weeks of showing her that I was committed to helping her, the doubt faded, and we have worked well together for four years now.

In addition to dedication to helping others improve, I offer the following specific advice to educators looking to inspire the next generation: Make every child feel welcome and valued every day. Greet your students at the door with a smile and tell them that you’re glad to see them—even the students who act out. Plan for and teach rigorous differentiated lessons based on product, process, and content. Learn as much as you can and never stop.

Remember that this work is as much about your heart as it is about your head. Expect great things from your students and colleagues. They will surprise you and themselves with what they can achieve.

William Hill is Regional Executive Director, Midwest, for Partners in School Innovation, whose mission is to transform teaching and learning in the lowest-performing public schools so that every student, regardless of background, thrives. He can be reached at 443.538.2482 or whill@partnersinschools.org.
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- Doug Montey, Building and Grounds Supervisor, Berrien RESA

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have worked with school budgets for nearly 40 years and find the more I inclusively involve the greater school community of a district, the more buy-in and success the district will have in meeting its goals. At the end of a collaborative budget process, those involved feel ownership and support for the final plan and can help to positively change the culture of the entire organization.

Most districts I encounter continue to use old budget methods handed down from previous years. Some of the new techniques that could reinvigorate an entire district are often absent, mostly due to a lack of budget instruction in our university accounting curricula. In addition, the old methods of budgeting are relatively non-confrontational. The thought of moving forward with an unfamiliar new budget approach may seem daunting and will require the agreement of the superintendent, business official, and school board to be successful.

Empower Stakeholders with Zero-Base Budgeting
I have taught zero-base budgeting to many new superintendents, with a focus of identifying desired service levels, moving away from incremental budgeting habits, and installing a new collaborative approach. Under this method, the current district strategic plan is incorporated in budget planning. The formerly large budget document is first broken down into manageable and understandable cost centers with stated goals and expectations. Using this approach, everything must be justified in the proposed budget for the new year.

Academic Priorities and Spending Linked
The Chicago-based Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) has worked hard in recent years advocating for a new approach to convince districts nationwide to bring budgeting decisions in line with district instructional priorities. This research-based, cutting-edge approach from GFOA provides new tools for opening doors previously locked. The use of best practices, encouraging community engagement, and the development of long-range financial forecasts are all part of adopting this process.

GFOA has developed a series of Best Practices in School Budgeting, which clearly outlines steps to develop a budget that best aligns limited resources with student achievement needs. In conjunction with Best Practices, its Smarter School Spending website provides free resources at
www.smarterschoolspending.org. From planning to ensuring sustainability of process, its website has opened new ways of thinking about budget in concert with district instructional leaders and goals.

Long-term academic goals and budget process integration are the basis for this new GFOA process:

PLAN AND PREPARE

SET INSTRUCTIONAL PRIORITIES
4. Develop priorities 5. Estimate cost of options

PAY FOR PRIORITIES
6. Identify top savings options 7. Analyze top savings options

IMPLEMENT PLAN

ENSURE SUSTAINABILITY
11. Build internal capacity 12. Plan continuous improvement

Source: www.smarterschoolspending.org

Connecting Your Academic and Financial Leaders with S.M.A.R.T.E.R Goals
One of the greatest strengths of the new GFOA process is bringing the academic and financial leaders together to develop common strategies for student goal achievement. This is a groundbreaking notion because historically these two departments often work independently in many districts, using their own jargon and processes. Both departments could be more effective with a higher level of engagement. As a result, it is believed that student achievement will be the success story because the district’s instructional priorities provide a guide for budget decision-making.

Putting Best Practices to Work in Michigan
St. Johns Public Schools and Traverse City Area Public Schools are two Michigan districts that have enrolled for study under the GFOA process.

“Using these principles taught in GFOA, we are actively engaged in looking at how to re-deploy our fiscal resources for higher academic gains,” said St. Johns Public Schools Superintendent Dedrick Martin. “Our curriculum and business offices have been working side by side on how to reinvigorate learning in St. Johns Public Schools through this process. We have put forward a plan to our teachers and board that seems to be well received,” he said.

Superintendent Paul Soma from Traverse City Area Public Schools said his district began employing the GFOA budget process last year. “It has added a great deal of value and depth to our budget discussions. In the past, our primary focus was how much money we had to deal with, and now our focus is shifting to first identifying our educational priorities. We start with identification of priorities and then build a budget using GFOA screening tools. We are ultimately working toward the creation of a strategic financial plan,” Soma said.

Early Adopter in Oregon
One of the early adopters of the GFOA Best Practices was Beaverton Public Schools in Oregon. Superintendent Jeff Rose said, “A school budget can directly impact students if it is aligned with student needs. Traditional models tend to be trying to catch up to where you once were as opposed to aligning your budget with where you want to go.”

“The GFOA Best Practices have helped us focus our budget process. Our teaching and learning and our finance departments have worked hand-in-hand more so than ever before. We are truly looking at student data to make sure that more students graduate,” said Beaverton CFO Claire Hertz.

Donnell Sovey, CPA, CFO, is President and CEO of School and Municipal Advisory Services, PC. He previously served in public accounting and as a Michigan school business official for 34 years. Contact him at 517.231.0563 or donsovey@gmail.com.

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Every student travels a unique path through his or her educational experience, with many factors contributing to successes as well as failures along the journey. FDR once said, “We can’t always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.” With this in mind, the Oak Park School District has been supporting and growing its Gifted and Talented Honors (GATH) program to help students unleash their full potential and move the district to a schoolwide ethic of high expectations.

GATH program participants are a cohort of students provided with an advanced series of academic experiences resting on three core principles:

1. Scholarship (formal academic learning, training, and achievement);
2. Leadership (ability to guide, direct or positively influence others through action); and
3. Citizenship (social conduct that is mature and upholds the responsibilities that come with being an active member of an academic community).

These three principles help cultivate the Oak Park School District, where a climate of academic excellence has an opportunity to flourish.

“For an urban education environment like the Oak Park School District, where students experience high poverty, opportunities to participate in programs like GATH are rare but invaluable,” said Dr. Daveda Colbert, Oak Park School District Superintendent. “GATH provides a unique setting with an extraordinary support system that helps our students reach the next level. The exposure that they receive, as well as wraparound supports that lead to increased student achievement, helps create a direct pathway to success after high school graduation. GATH ensures students are career- and college-ready when they leave the Oak Park School District.”

Dr. Colbert describes the GATH program as a collaborative effort with school administrators, teachers, school staff, students, and parents—as well as the community’s business professionals—all in a concerted effort to unleash each student’s full potential.

“GATH is a unique opportunity that helps students reach their next level,” said Dr. Colbert. “With supports, they become well-rounded students. We have put identified structures in place around these student cohorts to improve their skills. And every year this program grows stronger, and more students become a part of it. Now, our GATH students stand out positively, like our student athletes do.”

Administrators and teachers are holding high expectations for students as well, understanding that earning trust and respect will inspire achievement. Oak Park High School junior Dana reflects this when she describes how her GATH classes are “rigorous” and they “push you to work harder because they (the teachers) believe that you have the ability.”
Oak Park honors physics and astronomy teacher Grayling Mercer teaches with the express purpose of preparing his students for college. “I want to make sure my students know the process of learning and not just how to get to the answers. I want to show them how to use critical thinking skills because not having them can lead to a lack of success in life.”

Being a GATH student means taking coursework that really tests their abilities at a higher level. “GATH pushes me to try harder and learn more,” said senior Anna. “The work requires me to dig deeper, find ways to keep my mind open to different things, and have deeper discussions.”

Engaging Parents and the Community
Oak Park High School Assistant Principal Carissa Peterson believes in the importance of parental involvement as part of the success they are seeing with the GATH students. “Parental involvement tends to drop off in high school,” said Peterson. “Holding monthly parent meetings keeps parents engaged with the program’s activities and informed of their student’s progress. It also leads students and parents that are not presently part of the GATH program to inquire about how they can be a part of a cohort.”

The monthly parent meetings cover meaningful topics such as relationship building, student growth mindset, and promoting healthy competition. These subjects are all important in getting the family engaged in fostering a college- and career-readiness mindset in the student.

Another important aspect of parental involvement with the program is how it is changing the mindset surrounding parent expectations of student achievement. “GATH is changing the students’ mindset to be one that reaches for something greater and higher, that is possible and real,” said Derrick Kellam, Oak Park District Instructional Coach. “We need to help our students’ parents to nurture college-bound students.”

An important component of GATH is equating each student’s individual success to the community’s success. “Academics, leadership, and citizenship will develop in this complete child,” said Kellam. “They will move forward academically and be socially aware that they are part of a larger community.”

Community involvement includes internships at area businesses, job-shadowing placements, and the opportunity to participate in interviewing with career professionals at an Oak Park High School-sponsored Portfolio of Scholars event.

“The Portfolio of Scholars event involves our students undergoing real-world interviews with community business owners and their representatives,” says Dr. Colbert. “The students then receive immediate feedback about their conversation, wardrobe, goals, and portfolio. They also have a unique opportunity to ask the interviewers questions about possible career choices and have exposure to a wide variety of employment opportunities.”

Students are focused on college- and career-ready skills in their coursework.
GATH Program Offers Inspiration to District

GATH students are a bright spot in the school community, according to Kwame Stephens, Oak Park High School principal. “Identifying and highlighting those bright spots allows you to show the school community what is possible,” says Stephens. “Here are students that look just like you, have many of the same struggles, the same challenges—and look at how they are excelling. It brings a sense of hope, and a sense of, ‘This can be done. I can overcome and am greater than my circumstances.’”

Oak Park administrators share the belief that the GATH program won’t stay with just the cohorts, but that it is filtering throughout the building and will change the culture of the district. “It won’t be contained,” says Stephens. “It will take on a life of its own.”

Oak Park is looking at what works for the students and courses contained in the GATH program. The district is pushing those learnings into the general program tracks with the hope of developing more and more students striving to achieve at higher academic standards. This has led to professional development provided to teachers with a focus on increasing rigor in all classrooms and implementing techniques that create deeper learning for all students. “Hopefully in the future all Oak Park students will look like our GATH students, with every school day filled with engaged learning,” said Kellam.

Oak Park is working very hard to make sure students understand the importance of education and that they are provided opportunities and exposure to situations that will increase their individual expectations.

“What will it take to get all of our students participating in GATH?” asks Mercer. “That’s the question that I ask myself. We need to be asking ourselves this as educators: How do we motivate all students to reach their full potential by taking advantage of opportunities like GATH?”

Watch a video about Oak Park’s GATH program on the MASA Vimeo channel at https://vimeo.com/gomasa.

Mitch Smith is a Communication Specialist with MASA. Contact him at 517.327.5910 or mitchsmith@gomasa.org.
In May 2014, prior to the end of last school year, we received a phone call from a mother who expressed a desire to retain her son in the eighth grade. She was extremely skeptical that her son was ready to make the jump from middle to high school, and she was right. Academically, he probably was not ready. This boy needed a solid transition from the eighth to ninth grade that was not offered at Plainwell High School (PHS). At that moment, an idea was born.

In our counseling meetings, we talked about the need to get away from our traditional virtual summer school for eighth-grade students, which led to more conversations with a retiring teacher, who shared her daughter’s experience at Central Michigan University’s Leadership Safari (www.cmich.edu/ess/ResLife/LeadershipSafari/Pages/default.aspx). The idea sparked by our conversation with a student’s mother began to take on more shape. There had to be a better way to ease the transition to high school for our students.

PHS is not alone. Across the nation, high schools are facing a common concern of providing incoming ninth grade students with a successful transition to high school. The first year of high school is tough, and often one that can make or break a student.

According to Allensworth and Easton (2007), freshman performance does matter.
In their study, they looked at the relationship between semester course failures and graduation rate and found that freshmen who failed zero courses had an 85 percent recent graduation rate compared to a 70 percent graduation rate for those who failed one course. The graduation rate decreased to 55 percent with just two failures.

With these concerns in mind, Plainwell Community Schools developed the PHS Champions program. During the last two weeks of summer, the high school held camp for these champions and provided them with the tools they would need in order to be successful in their transition to ninth grade (See chart above).

The PHS Champions Camp was a two-week-long summer program taught by three ninth-grade teachers (math, English, and health) at PHS. The teachers were hand selected for their skills in developing relationships with students. In addition, four student mentors served as role models for the champions. The goal of the program was to ensure a successful transition into high school by building relationships between the students and their teachers—and a connection to the school in general.

The middle school staff identified 40 students who could benefit from the PHS Champions program. Those chosen to participate were identified either as student leaders or students who had struggled in school. Most were in the bottom 30 percent of their class and considered at risk.

The high school sent letters to these prospective students during May 2015, with the request of a response by June 1. In addition, individual phone calls were made to students who did not respond. This created a feeling of being hand selected for this new program, and with it came a sense of purpose and belonging. Thirty students, their three teachers, and four fellow student mentors made up the inaugural Plainwell High School Champions program.

The program aims to provide students a multi-tiered approach to prepare them with the skills necessary for high school success. Roadtrip Nation Education was the chosen curriculum (www.roadtripnation.org) to serve as the central text for the course. It enables students to find their passion and work toward it. The goal of the course is to interview a community member in a career field of interest to the student.

Students were divided into three teams with an assigned mentor student and teacher. The teams competed in various team-building games throughout the week in order to earn points that could be used for prizes and other activities. Students took a field trip to Fort Custer and participated in the Leadership Reaction Course, where teams had to think and work through problems.

Academically, the students also sampled lessons in English 9, algebra, and health. The goal was to prepare them for the 71-minute classes that PHS offers. The teachers increased the amount of instructional time over the two weeks from 20 minutes per day to 71 minutes and taught the material that students would be seeing during the first two weeks of class. This allowed students to experience a typical freshman class.
and provided them the ability to be ahead of their peers from day one. According to ELA Teacher and Champions Instructor Alex Stacy, the opportunities offered by the Champions program have benefited both the students who went through it and the staff who led it.

“Coming into their freshman year, the students were given early access to the rigorous schedule, unique challenges, and unfamiliar surroundings of high school, thereby allowing them to make any necessary changes and adjustments prior to the official start of the school year,” said Stacy. “The staff was able to build individual connections with the students and identify any potential areas of concern with the academic and social expectations that are present at Plainwell High School.”

The two weeks culminated with the entire ninth-grade class coming together for a traditional one-day ninth-grade orientation. The champions were now familiar and comfortable with the school and were able to help the other freshmen around the campus find their way. At the end of the program, the school brought in three standup comedians to start the school year in a fun, positive way.

Students felt as if the program was an overall success. Student Lucy stated, “My favorite experience was meeting new students and mixing with people I have never really talked to before. It made me feel like it was a very safe place in high school.”

James, another student, added, “My favorite part was getting to interact with other freshmen. The students that showed up were from all groups in school, from unpopular to popular. And yet, working together throughout the summer has brought the entire grade closer together. I would like to continue to see this happen with incoming freshmen. It merges the popularity groups until they don’t really exist, and everyone gets along so much better because of the program.”

We have seen an improvement in ninth-grade performance overall. Nate is one example. In eighth grade, he failed multiple classes. As a result of the Champions program, he was more focused in class. “It has helped me get used to not being afraid or nervous to ask questions because I have relationships with the teachers now,” Nate said. Nate is currently passing four of his five classes and is very close to passing all five.

Schoolwide, there has been a significant decrease in failures. For the class of 2018, we saw 40 freshmen failing 80 classes. This year for the class of 2019, at the midterm 36 students are failing 60 classes—a decrease of four students and 20 classes failed.

Overall, the two weeks spent were a learning experience for both students and staff. PHS staff offered students a chance to connect with the high school in a safe, fun environment. We have more ideas and a larger target audience for future years. This year, the first year, will always be special. Perhaps the best testament comes from a school board meeting. While staff was explaining the Champions program, an attendee in the back of the audience raised her hand and requested to be recognized. She was the mother who called in the beginning of the summer. She thanked the high school staff and was so appreciative of the help and support that her son had received. She said he was a different person, and most importantly that he was passing all of his classes!

Jeremy Wright is the High School Principal for Plainwell Community Schools. He has held various roles, such as High School Assistant Principal, Secondary Reading Supervisor, and French and Technology Teacher. Contact him at 269.685.9554 or jwright@plainwellschools.org.

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Our library is the busiest place in the school. Long before the first bell chimes the official start of class, students can be found clustered in the library receiving help from service agents—other students.

We are seeing technology and education transform to inquiry-based problem-solving focused on real-world learning. In the midst of this change, our library has evolved into a center where the students serve as engineers, mentors, and tutors.

On the first day of school, all new freshmen come to the library to check out a book. Media studies students are the first to greet the incoming freshmen, assisting with book selection and checking out. In subsequent weeks, these same mentors hold small-group discussions and Q&A sessions where ninth-graders are able to identify with upperclassmen and partner with them. This sends a strong message about the importance of literacy.

When declining funding eliminated preschool buses to our local public library, our high school library created a young children’s section. Twice a week the high school media students teach literacy lessons to three- and four-year-olds, integrating stories, crafts, technology, music, and dance into literacy lessons.

When senior citizens call to inquire about classes for using their computers or iPads, the students set up free lessons in our media center.

When a grant and bond issue provided us the opportunity to purchase an iPad for every student in our district, our library and student leaders developed a management plan for maintaining fully functioning technology.

The iPad repair team, comprised of student technology mavericks who thrive on challenge, assess damages, or order parts—and replace screens and digitizers, cameras, and headphone jacks, often with same-day or next-day efficiency. The students on our team are as unique as the students they serve. They are writers, artists, athletes, and techies. Some are chair bound, and others are singers and dancers. Some have unlimited resources, while others have financial need. But they all have one thing in common: They’re willing to help.

They understand what it means to overcome obstacles, and how important it is to have a place to belong—a place where, no matter what you need, someone will be there to assist. The structure of our program promotes literacy while addressing technology, mentoring to freshmen and new students, assisting in the classroom, and modeling digital citizenship.

The library also serves as a think tank for issues that arise. When the water in a city not 50 miles from ours became unsafe to drink, groups gathered in the library to come up with a plan to help. After a series of tragic deaths from traffic accidents plagued our community, our library implemented a safe driving
program in our schools and town. The iPad service center is another example of a student-empowered solution.

When our local township needed help with funding and manpower for community projects, the library wrote grants and secured volunteers. When a resident came to us about a family in our community whose house was being condemned, we spearheaded our own home makeover campaign.

A few years ago, at freshmen orientation, a graduating senior addressed a tour group of anxious incoming ninth graders. They were unsure of whether or not they would be able to manage the rigors of high school. The tour guide simply stated, “When you get to high school, if you need anything, a pencil, help with homework, your locker opened, tutoring, anything at all, just go to the library and someone will be there to help you.” She said that’s what got her through high school.

Many years ago, libraries were the cultural and educational center of communities. Today that is still true.

A student recently came to the library and said, “I’m driving the struggling train.” Our goal is to make sure every struggling train is back on the track and moving forward before we send them on their way. It’s part of our mission and core values.

Most importantly, we empower students to be catalysts for change. We call upon them to take on adult roles and responsibilities, to embed themselves in solutions in the 21st century and beyond.

Watch a video about Swan Valley’s media center program on the MASA Vimeo channel at https://vimeo.com/gomasa.

Kay Wejrowski is the Library Media Specialist at Swan Valley High School in Saginaw, Michigan. Wejrowski has been named the Saginaw County Teacher of the Year, was one of three finalists for the 2014 Michigan Teacher of the Year, and was honored by MACUL this spring with the Frank Miracola Educational Excellence Award. Contact her at 989.921.2445 or kwejrow@swanvalley.k12.mi.us.

“Your goal is to make sure every struggling train is back on the track and moving forward before we send them on their way. It’s part of our mission and core values.”

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Connecting to a Regional Career Focus

By Douglas Trombley

Our region has long been known for career fields that require science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Manufacturing and healthcare are just two of the more prominent career fields that support our region’s economy. In recent years, though, the stigma associated with the collapse of the auto industry and the overall economy has caused our graduates to naturally steer clear of these areas of employment preparation. Students have been guided away from pursuing many STEM fields due to a belief that there are no jobs available. As the economy improved and the area’s businesses realigned to supply and demand, careers in STEM-related fields are not only available, but employers are having a difficult time finding qualified candidates to fill openings.

The Great Lakes Bay Regional Alliance has undertaken a STEM Impact Initiative to aid our region with aligning educational practices with career opportunities. During the study, the needs of our region became very apparent. The annual mean wage for a STEM job is $79,395—nearly 71 percent higher than the average for all occupations and industries, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. These are not just jobs requiring a college degree, but also many skilled trades and certificated programs that provide a substantial income.

Manufacturing and healthcare drive roughly 38 percent of our region’s...
economic output, but only 16 percent of graduates major in STEM-related fields. Thus, there is a large gap between the number of openings and the available workforce. It is our job as educators to prepare tomorrow’s workforce. This means aligning our focus with the needs of our region’s employers.

This doesn’t mean just telling our students to go into STEM fields because there are jobs. It means graduating students that are proficient in math and science. This is easier said than done.

Most students are not fond of mathematics because it’s essentially its own language and is most often taught separately from other subjects and content. Students often do not see the relevance of mathematics to their world. Science has historically been taught as a subject with a great deal of content and facts with very little focus on processes and application. These areas of instructional practice are where schools can shift their thinking and make learning math and science more meaningful for students.

We have made progress with our student engagement through several initiatives and plan to build upon them. Our district STEM coordinator hosted a very successful STEM day for kids this past year. The students and parents found the day very rewarding. We implemented a Project-Based Learning (PBL) coach into our after-school programs where students enjoyed the hands-on activities provided. Along with Dow Chemical’s generous financial support of these initiatives, they have also provided guests in our classrooms that our students found to be helpful in making math and science more relevant. Our industrial technology programs produce outstanding results and are at capacity because so many students are requesting to be a part of the programs. We have also provided our teachers with professional development opportunities in STEM areas with a focus on increasing student engagement through more applied learning opportunities.

In each of these initiatives, the point of emphasis is the engagement of students in activities that apply math, science, and technology in order to learn them. Along with continuing our successful initiatives in these areas, we will also be expanding the use of more project-based learning with a STEM focus throughout our district.

We are undertaking substantial efforts at the third- through fifth-grade level that will provide our students with more opportunities to engage in STEM through project-based learning. It’s at this age where students really begin using literacy and math skills in other subject areas, and we want our students to find the application of their newly acquired skills to be meaningful, engaging, and rewarding. Finding purpose and success with math and science at a young age will lead to future success and engagement as each student progresses through school and into the workforce.

Douglas Trombley was hired as the Curriculum Director of Saginaw Township Community Schools in January 2012 and became Superintendent of schools in August 2012. Contact him at 989.797.1800 x507 or datrombl@stcs.org.

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