

CCSS Leadership Community of Practice 3/31/16
Problem-Based Learning, Connecticut Core Standards and Technology
Breakout Session with New Fairfield Middle School (NFMS) Presenters

What are the key points we take away from this session? What will you bring back to your school or district?

Participants remarked that they learned that this innovation was implemented in baby steps. They discussed what is already in place at their schools, but asked, “How can we take the technology further?” They examined what would be the most effective way to share with their principals. What would be the one thing that they can do at their schools to plant the seed?

One participant discussed how they might use the images of the schoolhouse and the globe to begin a discussion of the presentation. Others shared what they have already other started at their schools, such as a Friday Genius project with the assistance of the technology person. Yet others considered the challenges, of implementation, which may need to be addressed, such as finances or the need to use apps and sites that are ad-free. (Presenters suggested *Adblock*.) All agreed that the main focus of today’s session was getting students engaged and involved in their own learning and that giving students more choices helps accomplish this. The presenters indicated that they do have outliers, but the focus is on what else they can do to support student engagement. They indicated that this is a challenge all along the continuum, from those students who need more support to those who are already reading well above grade level.

The discussion turned to some of the particulars of the way in which New Fairfield Middle School has moved to personalize instruction. The 75-minute class schedule enables teachers to concentrate on only two to three core classes each day and gives students more than one day to complete an assignment. The NFMS team discussed how they began by sharing the use of learning menus with their colleagues by using a video. It was a good illustration of how teachers are willing to take risks to try something new. This led to a discussion of how the school developed a culture of risk-taking, where teachers are not afraid of failure. Teacher-presenters cited the attitude of administrators, who have created a climate of trust. Their focus is: How can we fix this? What would happen if...? Administrators admit that they do not have all of the answers, but that this is a shared journey to find a solution. Finally there was some discussion about how faculty meetings are conducted. Faculty meetings are considered opportunities for discussion. Information, like scheduling, is sent out in a weekly newsletter, along with “Something to ponder.” The agenda and resources for the discussion are sent out ahead of the meeting. Meetings are working sessions with the focus on “What will staff members be able to take away that they can use tomorrow.” The assistant principal noted how proud she and the principal are of the work that the staff does at these meetings and cited a recent session on rubrics that occurred right before the long weekend.

The final thoughts of the breakout session centered on encouraging participants to understand that they are not far away from this vision. This has been a four-year journey for New Fairfield Middle School. Our job is to see how we can take steps to begin to incorporate their core values by sharing what was discussed today and finding others who wish to move the work. At the heart of this discussion is always: How do you keep the students at the center?