

Sharing in the Group Project

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How do we find solutions to complex problems? Together.

My recent visit to Sacramento New Technology High School in California reaffirmed this truism. As part of a distinguished delegation of educational, business and community leaders, including State Superintendent Paul Pastorek, child advocate Karran Harper Royal, and businessman Robert Reily among others, I visited New Tech to hopefully bring back to New Orleans an essential component of a world class educational system. I believe we found an adaptable model that can serve Orleans Parish. However, we placed in our backpacks a much deeper lesson - responsive and durable solutions come out of collective learning and action.

The name New Tech conveys its lineage to the technology hub of the world, Silicon Valley. There's something incredibly right with the thinking that grew the most competitive engineers, computer scientists and venture capitalists from orchard fields. It comes as no surprise that its leaders used familiar methodologies of finding answers toward the development of prototypical schools for their families.

The backbone and heart of any school lies in its curriculum and teachers respectively. New Tech revolves around project-based instruction, which uses real world problems to engage students in cooperative investigations. Students don't have occasional group projects. School, like life, is a big group project. Teachers trust their students and assignments will meet state standards in various content areas, and students trust themselves enough to share the workload. Teachers give grades for individual contributions as well as team participation.

Each class is team taught by two instructors of different disciplines. The interdisciplinary nature of real world projects demands this type of instruction. For instance in one class, a physical education and science teacher led a project on eating disorders. Students do most of the research and data collection on-line. The school features a 1:1 student to computer ratio. Teachers assigned specific groups of students to complete various aspects of the project before a designated deadline. Students then had to market, advertise and present their findings just as a project group would report to their employer.

As you can imagine, classrooms were frenetically organized. Classroom rocked with the sound of work. As students accomplished multiple tasks, they wore headphones, talked with colleagues, and moved freely throughout the space. Teachers allowed for individual freedom, which was reflected in their appearance. Students did not wear uniforms. Their hair came in different textures, styles and colors. The only consistency between students was their tremendous ability to communicate with words and present products or assignments.

Clearly these students received a quality education as evidenced by their ability to understand complex issues, cooperate, and communicate to cohorts of critical observers. New Orleanians could learn a great deal from these students. In the Crescent City, too often high school attendance can predict social standing. Embarrassingly, the group privately debated whether or not these precocious children came from backgrounds similar to New Orleanian public school students simply because New Tech products could speak well. New Tech students represent a cross-section of Sacramento. Like many public schools, New Tech presented an uncomfortable number of folks on free and reduced

lunch yet they were indistinguishable from those students whose parents were pilots and medical professionals.

Students projected their school identity before any other. However, the gender breakdown is skewed heavily towards boys. Males consisted of 63% of the student body. I personally thought this ratio responded to a need to reengage boys back into the classroom. The graduation rates of black males in New Orleans warrants gender sensitive initiatives.

New Tech High's magic comes from its ability utilize individual strength and diversity while simultaneously instilling a strong sense of community. I am often dismayed at the overemphasis educators rigidly place on mathematic computational skills and reading comprehension. If these important skills don't translate into cohesive, safe and productive communities, then what exactly are we doing? We entered and left New Tech feeling like we encountered a successful family-run business.

This family ethic was so contagious that by the end of the day, the diverse delegation started to plan and work together on bringing more New Techs to the Parish. The New Tech experience made painfully apparent that the roadblocks that limited our educational system Pre-Katrina are starting to resurface in our current reforms. Interest groups use competition as a disguise to cloak an inability to work as a team or community. How often have you heard, "I can't work with this person or that person? How often have you felt that sentiment? New Orleanians need to learn from the New Tech example. It will take more folks than we currently have to create an enviable public school system. Why can't we work together to revitalize our communities? Maybe we should give our problems to the New Tech students to fix.

To learn more about New Tech High please call Sue Burge at 504 469-7165. Or, you can go to the New Technology Foundation Website at www.newtechfoundation.org.