

Scott's Branch implements New Tech teaching approach

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Freshmen starting at Scott's Branch High School this fall are going to get a different approach to learning, and it's not just because they are leaving middle school.

The Clarendon School District 1 school is one of two in the state selected to be a New Tech school.

"Three years ago, I heard about New Tech, and I thought it was more technology," said Principal Gwendolyn Harris. "That's not even close. It's a lot more project-based learning. The computer is one resource. I was first excited thinking new technology, but I was even more excited when I learned it was about holding students accountable for their learning and team building."

New Tech was founded in the mid-1990s in Napa, Calif., when local business leaders became concerned that graduating students who met state standards would still not be prepared for the quickly changing working world.

The other South Carolina school implementing the program is Colleton High School in Walterboro.

"Learning by doing is not a new idea," said Detrice Brown, an English teacher. "It's always been encouraged. We want students engaged in their own learning.

This approach just gives educators a common language to work with, said Robert Ragno, an engineering and project Lead the Way teacher.

For classes that already use project-based learning such as JROTC, New Tech can expand the project.

In other classes, it is going to be a little different.

"Traditionally, we give information to students and expect them to give it back to us on a test," said Harold Ehnhus, science teacher. "This new approach, we give them a problem to solve, and we're more facilitators."

It's taking a problem, deciding what the student knows and finding out what the student needs to know, he said. The teachers then work with the students to develop a project.

Similarly, in math, students would take a problem and scaffold what they know and what they need to know, said math teacher Lottie Fleming.

"They may have to use research skills or information they've previously learned," she said. "What I like most about it is they are going to be writing more in math to explain the process and present it. They will be using mathematical terminology in oral communication. It brings different disciplines together in conjunction with each other."

They will improve their work through "critical friends."

"They'll discuss their projects, and students will have the chance to say, 'I like this. I wonder about this,'" Ragno said. "Teachers won't be the sole judge. They will have to present their project to others outside the school. This forces them into public speaking so by the time they reach 12th grade, they will have given 50 to 70 presentations."

The confidence this instills in the teenagers really stood out for him when the teachers were able to visit schools that have used New Tech

for a number of years, Ragno said.

Ehnhuss also likes how this approach mimics "the real world."

"We're not just giving them traditional content but also social content," he said. "They're not picking their groups. They have to learn 'I may not like this person, but I will get along with him or her to get this done.' ... This social skill set added to the academic is a really good benefit."

Students will also be responsible for signing onto their own accounts and keeping up with their agendas, Ehnhuss.

All the content is aligned with Common Core standards, Fleming said. Projects are not limited to just a class, either. Students can also do grade-level and school-wide projects.

The school is seeking out community partners and has an advisory board as well, Harris said. So far, the response from the parents, students and other community members has been positive, she said.

Next year, 10th grade will be added to the New Tech approach, 11th grade the following year and finally 12th grade in the 2016-17 academic year.

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