

In with the New Tech at high school

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Teachers standing behind a lectern or instructing from the blackboard will be on the way out at Scott's Branch High School come the first day of school in the 2013-14 school year.

Clarendon School District 1 officials announced Tuesday in Summerton that the school will become one of two in the state that year to implement changes advocated by the non-profit New Tech Network that they hope will steer students toward the skills needed to succeed in the careers of tomorrow.

"We are just pleased to be part of this ground-breaking process," said Superintendent Rose Wilder. "What we are facing now here in Summerton is trying to get kids ready not just for the 21st century workplace, but we are preparing them for jobs that don't even exist yet."

Planning for the unplannable is practically part of the New Tech Network's mantra. 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 network now has 86 high schools across the nation that stress Project-based learning (PBL) that is "contextual, creative and shared," according to President Lydia Dobyns.

"Students collaborate on projects that require critical thinking and presentation skills," she said. "By making learning relevant in this way, student engagement reaches new levels and produces better educational outcomes. All classrooms have a one-to-one computing ratio. Every student becomes a self-directed learner who no longer needs to rely primarily on teachers or text books for knowledge and direction."

Tuesday's announcement that Scott's Branch will join Colleton High School in Walterboro as the state's first schools to receive such instructional changes was made possible through a \$3 million grant provided through the Riley Institute at Furman University and KnowledgeWorks. The district also acquired \$50,000 matching funds from area sponsors.

"The face of teaching is no longer going to be standing behind the podium and dictating," Wilder said. "I'm amazed to see students who are a part of this kind of learning process and the way they drive themselves.

Wilder got to see such drive in person when she and other officials visited a New Tech High School in Anson, N.C., that began using New Tech initiatives five years ago. Teacher Blaine Maples said her school instituted its own eight core criteria on which to assess student improvement.

"I've seen the kids grow quite a bit," she said. "The focus is not just on content, which is what we'd graded on all these years, but it's on the outcomes we set up ourselves, like written and oral communication; content; critical thinking; collaboration; work ethic; technological literacy; and global awareness. You'll come up with your own, but those were the ones we saw our students most needed in this world."

Dobyns said the direction formerly provided for by a teacher in the traditional classroom would instead be provided by what she called a "robust learning management system" - NTN Echo. The software helps all those involved in the educational process connect - students, teachers, administrators and parents.

"The system houses extensive project and resource libraries shared among all schools in the network," Dobyns said. "Parents can also connect to see how their children are improving in the chosen core areas for each school, so they will know what their child needs to work on the most."

Work with the software promotes a culture of "trust, respect and responsibility," she added. Test scores at network schools also show improvement, with network schools averaging a 84 percent graduation rate to the nation's 64 percent.

"At our schools, students and teachers alike have exceptional ownership of the learning experience and their school environment," Dobyns said. "But that also comes with responsibility. So, instead of being graded just on the assignment itself, where you'd have gotten a B on a paper before, now you're being graded on the presentation of that paper and perhaps if you turned it in on time. So, you would go into Echo and be able to see that, if you turned the paper in three days late, you did indeed get a B on the content, but you got a D on the timing."

Wilder said Scott's Branch freshmen would be the first students for her district in the program. Colleton will only involve a portion of its incoming freshmen that year as the school already has four learning communities involving leadership, education and public service; business education and marketing; humanities and arts; and health and human services.

That's the beauty of the network, Dobyn's said, as the organization provides training and other materials to help a school mold its own standards, as Maples noted.

"There's a lot of evidence showing that we're failing our current generation of students across this nation," Dobyns said. "We find kids ill-prepared to enter the workplace, and we hear that from businesses. Our model helps kids learn the things businesses want in the modern world, like technology literacy, working with others and accountability."