

Leading The Country in Tech Implementation

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“I never thought I would see this kind of transformation in our schools during my lifetime. It is truly life-changing.” This is Karen Rose describing the revolutionary change that is nearly complete in 290 Sarasota County middle-school classrooms.

What is Rose, the school district’s executive director of middle schools, talking about? Gulf Coast Community Foundation and Sarasota County Schools have already transformed every middle-school math and science class into a STEMsmart TechActive classroom. Equipped with interactive technology and configured so students work in teams and are empowered by newly trained teachers who are more coaches than lecturers, these classes hit all the marks for helping students enjoy—and excel at—learning.

Teachers and students embrace technology. Students collaborate on real-world problems. Teachers encourage students to be responsible for their learning—and to one another. No longer do students sit in rigid rows of desks that most of us remember from school, the product of an “assembly-line, mass-production mentality,” as our friend and futurist Peter Diamandis describes it.

It’s really the hands-on learning, real-world connections and creation of their own knowledge that jazzes students when they work in the new classrooms. So, why couldn’t the same tools be turned toward the humanities?

That’s what the Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation asked, and in 2014 it funded a pilot project through Gulf Coast to extend our STEMsmart technology to every English and Social Studies classroom in Sarasota Middle School. An evaluation showed that students in these classrooms found learning more fun, engaging and interesting. Teachers raved too. “It’s more exciting for them to be learning through the computers and research than listening to a lecture or following notes,” says one teacher.

Such evidence inspired Gulf Coast and the Barancik Foundation to scale the TechActive approach to *all* Sarasota County middle-school classrooms. That \$3.5-million effort, in collaboration with the school district, will be complete next year. And when it is, says Dr. Kevin Baird, a national expert in college and career readiness, there will be “no comparable implementation in the United States,” making Sarasota County “a model site for all schools” across the country.

For our students and teachers, meanwhile, these 21st-century, technology-integrated classrooms are bringing history and language arts to life. Like the history class that was studying ancient Indian emperor Ashoka. As small teams of students huddled around their tables’ touchscreen computers, they analyzed primary and secondary sources, “really digging deep into the text,” according to their teacher. Was Ashoka an enlightened leader or ruthless conqueror? The students next created their own newspapers electronically to explore and debate the question, weaving in details about ancient India and the Mauryan Empire. Sounds more meaningful than copying notes or following along in a textbook like I remember (or don’t).

Another teacher says, “The bottom line is, they need to be able to put their hands on something and they need to be able to get involved, and that’s what this is offering. They tell me they *want* to work.” How about that? Middle-school students who *want* to work, whether the lesson is algebra or Ashoka.

What started as an idea to move the needle locally on STEM performance is revolutionizing how the next generation will experience education. Still one more teacher tells us, “If someone were to come in tomorrow and take away my workstation monitors and my tablets, I would cry a lot. It would be a horrible, horrible day.” Nobody wants to see that. And thanks to visionary partners like the Barancik Foundation, many more Gulf Coast donors, and our innovative school district, we won’t have to.

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