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Focus on Access

Working toward an ideal school experience for all students

Forget the rapidly diminishing resources available to public schools with the state's ongoing budget cuts. Ignore the time and physical constraints of the school day. Disregard the "because it's always been done this way" mentality. Then ask yourself: What makes an ideal school experience for all students?

For the past several years, educational leaders in the Issaquah School District have tackled this exact question. They have organized focus groups and surveys with students, parents, and teachers. They have researched best national and international practices. They have looked intensely at their own academic and climate data. They have consulted with other districts and schools. They have collaborated and brainstormed intensely throughout the school year.

"Beyond the fads and quick fixes, we are stripping down our focus to the most important thing—how can we create an optimal learning experience for all students?" said Superintendent Steve Rasmussen. "We are not letting our resources dictate our program, but rather letting our ideal program dictate our best creative thinking about leveraging technical and community resources."

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Emphasis on Access (top to bottom): Skyline student Jenna Hoole conducts a physics experiment. Briarwood teacher Sarah Rahlfs helps a student with a project. Boeing project manager Jim Blohowiak explains the design and manufacturing process behind the 747-8 to Liberty's Honors Physics and Intro to Engineering classes.

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Ultimately, the education leaders agreed on several key components that contribute to an optimal school experience, with one in particular they selected for further exploration this year: Access. At its heart, this is about maximizing students' access to challenging courses, caring faculty, relevant programs, and quality instruction.

High school students themselves identified the critical access points in their learning:

- Access to a wide variety of courses and activities.
- Access to upper level classes without unnecessary prerequisites.
- Access to teachers who care about them as individuals.
- Access to teachers who use a variety of instructional styles.
- Access to real-world, career-related courses.
- Access to an environment safe for academic and social exploration.
- Access to as many options as possible after graduation.
- Access to flexibility in fulfilling graduation requirements.

Moving from the theoretical, this philosophy of access has already begun to pervasively guide schools' approach to learning, decision making, and allocation of resources. Access has become a filter, generating changes such as:

- Every sophomore and junior now has the opportunity to take the Practice SAT (PSAT) during the school day, putting them a step closer to successful college admission.
- The District is partnering with the state to offer high-quality, standards-based online courses for students. The District is also offering its own online courses, such as high-school health.
- Online comprehensive tutoring support is now available to all middle- and high-school students.
- The high-school technology requirement is moving to middle school, providing more flexibility in the high school schedule. The course is being redesigned to stay aligned with the most cutting-edge skills.
- All teachers are engaged in systematic professional development to learn how to reflect on and strengthen their own practices to

reach every level of learner in the classroom.

- Middle-school students who take classes available for high-school credit no longer have to decide at the beginning of the course whether they want the grade applied to their high-school transcript. They now have until their junior year.
- Prerequisites are changing to learning recommendations to allow students and families to make more informed decisions when registering for upper-level courses.
- Teaming with the Issaquah Schools Foundation, secondary schools now offer expanded before- and after-school homework help for all students. The Issaquah Schools Foundation also provides the VOICE program, which pairs an adult mentor with an at-risk student for academic and social support.
- Schools are partnering with industry experts. This includes bringing in professionals as part of advisory boards or having them teach classes such as culinary arts and computer science.
- The school day is being expanded by classes offered before and after the official bell times.
- Summer school is transforming into an enrichment opportunity with classes to earn core credits or to explore a career.
- Administrators are reevaluating the equivalency policy so that more inter-disciplinary courses may be eligible to fulfill several graduation requirements.

"Much of this work may seem piecemeal when viewed individually, but it really has been purposefully orchestrated under the broad filter of 'access,'" said Patrick Murphy, Executive Director of Secondary School Education. "We are continually looking for ways to open opportunities for students and remove obstacles."

Please flip inside this edition of *Focus* to read more about some of the programs and initiatives underway to provide greater access to students.

Online learning offers scheduling flexibility

Rigorous classes help meet individual needs



Between graduation and college-entrance requirements and an unlimited number of potential interests to pursue, students often struggle to fit everything they want into their middle- and high-school class schedule. Luckily, ever-advancing technology means that online courses are becoming a viable way to stretch the traditional school day.

That's where Susan Canaga comes in. Thanks to the technology apportionment of the 2010 Capital Levy, she is the District's newly appointed Online Learning Coordinator. She is focusing on two main areas to grow online offerings: 1. Certifying that accepted online classes meet appropriate state standards, and 2. Building in-school supports for students taking online classes. In line with both efforts, the District this year has partnered with the state education office's digital learning department, which screens and approves only accredited online providers that meet Washington's academic and teaching standards; it also provides online tutoring for all students.

"Online courses provide options for students to meet their individual needs, access classes

that may not be available at their school, and gain 21st-century technology skills," Canaga said. "Keep in mind, an online course is not an easy solution, as some might assume. Online courses have the same rigor and workload as a regular class, and students need to expect to put in the same time and effort."

Online courses can also help students avoid scheduling conflicts or accommodate a health issue, according to Canaga; however, an online student misses the traditional, enriching social interactions in a physical classroom and has to be very self-motivated to stay organized and do the work throughout the semester without daily teacher face time.

Barring extenuating circumstances, students are allowed two credits from approved outside online courses on their high-school transcript. Additionally, the District is developing its own online courses, which have no credit cap. Online Health is one example; about 150 students take this course annually to free space in their high-school schedule for other classes. To move other District courses online, Canaga and the technology department this

year have been implementing tools such as Moodle, which allows teachers to plan virtual lessons and assessments.

When students want to enroll in an online course, "we are involved from square one," Canaga said. They meet with their counselor to learn what's available and appropriate and to develop an educational plan. Then Canaga registers the student, provides an orientation, and maintains weekly contact.

"We still believe that a student's richest learning experience is in the physical classroom with our teachers," said Associate Superintendent Ron Thiele, "but we recognize that online courses can provide flexibility for busy students with complex lives. Our aim is to maintain the quality of an Issaquah School District diploma while providing access to other options."

More information, including the presentation from a recent online-learning night for families, is at:

www.issaquah.wednet.edu/academics/online/



District construction coordinator Royce Nourigat leads a group of students interested in construction careers through the Issaquah High building site.

Innovation and cross-credit opportunities in Career and Technical Education

Throw out any antiquated notions of vocational classes like home economics and woodshop—today's Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses focus on high-demand occupational and life skills while combining core knowledge in math, science, technology, literacy, and business. The resulting electives include financial algebra that teaches mathematics in the context of business; sports medicine, which explores anatomy and physiology as students practice real skills on the sports field; engineering based in technology and science; economics with a social-studies perspective; and woods technology using geometric principles.

“Vocational-type classes of the past only prepared students to enter the workforce directly out of school,” said Dennis Wright, District Director of Career and Counseling Services. “Yesterday's jobs are not the same as today's careers. Students now must have a greater variety of skills and knowledge. Students must know how to lead, reason, compute, communicate, and apply—often missing pieces in vocational education of the past, but core components of today's CTE. New high-demand, high-wage careers require post-secondary schooling, so CTE programs must prepare students for success in both college and the workforce.”

Under Wright, one major focus of the District's CTE program is opening scheduling and post-secondary access for students. By evaluating the standards taught in each course, more CTE electives are becoming eligible to fulfill core high school graduation requirements. In addition, many CTE courses are eligible for college credit through local community and technical colleges. Last year, for instance, students earned 4,369 college credits and saved an estimated \$393,210 in tuition costs by taking Issaquah School District CTE courses.

Summer = enrichment

Summer school has traditionally been reserved for students who need to repeat or make up classes. These off months, however, are prime time for extended learning, and the Issaquah School District is exploring more ways to offer students both enrichment activities and chances to earn core or elective credits.

Last summer, Beaver Lake seventh-grader Raoul Soans took advantage of one such opportunity by participating in Skyline's Forensic Workshop, an offshoot of the high school's criminal-justice class. Alongside fellow aspiring crime scene investigators (CSIs), Raoul solved staged crimes using fingerprint, shoe-print, and bite-mark analysis; fiber evidence; and deductive reasoning.

Q&A

Q. Why were you interested in the forensics workshop?

A. I signed up because I watch a lot of CSI shows, and I like investigation. Fingerprinting seemed really cool to me and so did taking prints of everything like my bite mark and my shoe.

Q. What was your favorite part?

A. My favorite thing was when we did a big CSI lab at the end of the class where there were a bunch of clues hidden throughout a room set up as a crime scene. That was really fun.

Q. Do you think you have a future as a CSI?

A. In my life right now, this was just a fun thing to do, but if I decided to become a CSI, this camp could be the basis of that decision.

Partnering with the pros

By the time most people's brains are just getting warmed up over coffee in the morning, students in Advanced Placement (AP) Computer Science at Issaquah High have already worked their way through complex binary-search and recursive algorithms. Lead by two industry experts from Microsoft, Brett Wortzman and Ben Garrison, this class is the newest example of how partnerships with local businesses are creating more advanced, relevant elective offerings in Issaquah schools.

"The students have been exceptionally engaged and have really taken advantage of the opportunity they have, including the uniqueness of their teachers being actual tech industry employees," Wortzman said. "They're constantly asking questions that go beyond what we're covering in class and tap our insight into the real world."

Wortzman and Garrison are both experienced Microsoft software development engineers, although Wortzman discovered that he has such a passion for teaching that he recently left to pursue a Master in Education at the University of Washington. Both have led university-level computer courses at their graduate alma maters, Wortzman at Harvard and Garrison at Georgia Tech.

The duo was linked with Issaquah High through the Technology Education and Literacy in Schools (TEALS) initiative, a grassroots effort by Microsoft employees to recruit, train,



Issaquah High senior Jeremy Tickman concentrates during his AP Computer Science class.

mentor, and place high-tech workers into local schools to team teach upper-level math, science, and technology classes. Founder Kevin Wang said he was spurred to create TEALS by the national imperative to keep the United States on the forefront of global discovery and innovation in coming generations.

Currently, Seattle and Issaquah are the only districts with TEALS electives. In addition to AP Computer Science, Issaquah High this year offered Web Design, and students from all of the District's high schools were invited to enroll. With the help of the Issaquah Schools Foundation, next year TEALS will expand to Skyline and Liberty High, and Introductory Computer Science will be added.

These classes require students to draw on advanced math, logic, and creativity skills. The challenge was welcome for senior Jeremy Tickman.

"[AP Computer Science] is by far my favorite class of the day and the most fun class I have taken while in high school," Tickman

said. "Everything we do in that class is fun, even the tests, as hard as they can be. The class can be really hard but once I figure why my code failed, all the hours of staring at the screen are worth it."

The Issaquah School District is likewise drawing on industry expertise across other disciplines. For example, a business advisory panel guides development of Career and Technical Education courses, current and former industry experts lead classes such as culinary arts and forensics, and teachers join with technology professionals to offer programs like robotics. These partnerships are good for students and for businesses, according to Wortzman.

"By allowing employees to teach these classes part time, Microsoft is exposing students to computer science who might not have otherwise had the opportunity, and, hopefully, helping to create and expand the next generation of STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math] graduates who will be able to do jobs that we currently have a hard time finding qualified people to do," Wortzman said.

Points of Pride

A few of the reasons you have to be proud of your schools

“Together We Can” create amazing art

More than 750 talented students across the District participated in this year’s national PTA Reflections art contest. All the submissions—including paintings, drawings, poems, and choreography—revolved around the theme “Together We Can.” To view the pieces that made it to the state-level competition, go to www.issaquah.wednet.edu/documents/Reflections10-11.pdf.

Teachers earn National Board Certification

In December, 31 Issaquah teachers—a larger class than any year before—learned they had earned National Board Certification (NBC). This distinction shows they are among the best educators in the nation. NBC is a voluntary assessment program that involves candidates demonstrating advanced content knowledge and teaching skill and practice.



High-school leaders unite

Student leaders from all four of the District’s high schools gathered together in February to share and brainstorm ideas and solidify cross-campus friendships.

Complete stories at: www.issaquah.wednet.edu/news/