Competency-based Education

Vista Unified School District – Empowering Students to Own Their Learning

How does your organization define competency-based education?

We are meeting children where they are and giving them the tools and resources that will allow them to master the standards and progress at a rate that will ensure they achieve mastery.

Currently our goal is to be a true one-to-one district where students can take their devices home. Right now we are not sending the computers home because of the Williams Act in California and some families do not have internet access.

Contributor
Name: Erin English
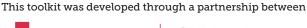Emails: erinenglish@vistausd.org

URL
http://digitalpromise.org/cbe_resource/vista-unified-school-district-empower-students-own-learning/

Overview

Recently Vista Unified, and specifically Vista High School, was awarded the XQ 10-million-dollar-grant. This has afforded us the opportunity to personalize our learning program for students at that school. To learn more about the work of the Vista High School Super School, see this link.

- We have pursued a number of strategies at a classroom and systems-level to help our students become more self-directed in their learning:

- Many students in grades 3 to 12 have taken personality profiles through Thrively and LEAP. These data provide the students with their strengths and interests.

- Teachers are allowing students to choose topics to study based on the Common Core

Standards as the foundation of the research. Part of students demonstrating what they know is to master the standards outlined in the project rubrics.

- We are offering trainings where teachers learn how to create units of study that have an overarching theme or essential question that drives the learning. This is not content-specific but focuses on mastery of the standards. Teachers will often group students to equally distribute different strengths so that they all contribute.

- We now have a program where students can take college classes on our high school campus. This will lead many to earn an Associates of Arts degree before graduating from high school. This is a new program for us, which is gaining traction. The college professors will be teaching high school students at our schools during the day. These classes will count towards both high school and college credit. We also offer an IB and AP track at most high schools.

Beliefs

As we work to help students become independent learners, we're keeping a few things in mind:
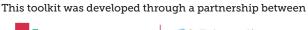
- We want our students to engage in a safe and accepting culture that encourages collaboration and risk-taking.

- We want our students to become ethical change agents who can identify challenges, make sense of what needs to be accomplished, develop possibilities to solve the challenge, and act to improve their home, school, as well as local and global communities.

- We believe firmly that our students voices need to be heard. We know that we cannot keep sending our young adults out into the world without them ever having made a decision in their learning pathway. We are trying to prepare them to be entrepreneurs of their life.

- We want our students to engage in learning which is intertwined with their strengths, interests, passions, and ideas. We are tired of seeing students fall through the cracks, and tired of "teaching to the middle."

- Our attendance levels need improvement and this model focuses on the unique learner and their accountability. When the stakes are high, there typically is buy-in.

Rationale

Vista Unified had a concern with our high student dropout rate and low numbers of students going to college. We realized that we needed to engage students in such a way that they would be motivated to become lifelong learners who are interested in their futures.

Outcomes

We are seeing a few different outcomes as a result of our attempts to focus on self-directed learning:

- During the 2016/2017 school year we started our personalized learning pathway with a group of 100 students at Vista High School. In the 2017/2018 school year we are personalizing the program of all freshman at Vista High School.

- Our high school transformation committee has created a graduate profile that addresses what we want our students to know and be able to do by the time they graduate.

- We have begun the conversation about shifting the cognitive load to students. We are asking students to choose learning pathways and pursue areas of interest.

- We are exploring personalized learning platforms and pathways for our students where they have more control of what they are doing while at school.

Surprises

When making change from the ground up, messaging becomes very important – people are very protective of their programs and the wrong message being sent out can jeopardize progress before the projects take flight. It is important to let all people in the room hearing the same message, and the why of the project needs to be transparent to everyone.

The changes we are making are complex. We are continually working to figure out the amount of training and the many things that you need to consider when transitioning. Training needs to take place where a vision of the future at the forefront.

Trade-offs

We are giving up some elements of district control over curriculum and instruction (pacing guides, content, and summative assessments). Although we still are requiring our schools to take the end of the year state assessments (for now), we are allowing our teachers to formulate their own summative and formative assessments at a class level during their Professional Learning Community (PLC) time.

Considerations

To transform what is happening in the classroom, we need to transform our teachers thinking first, then practice follows. To help with mindset shifts and exposure, it helps if teachers are exposed to the concept and importance of a Professional Learning Network (PLN). This takes them out of their classroom to see what others are doing. We use Twitter and LinkedIn as ways to spread information about the work we are doing.

Artifacts

Please review this link to see our progress on our goals: https://goo.gl/MIE0VT