Dysart Unified School District: How One School District Used Collaborative Planning to Improve Outcomes for All Students

This interactive video profile is the third in a series providing readers with a real-life, practical story about how district and school leaders are working to improve student learning outcomes through the effective use of digital learning, which is defined as "any instructional practice that effectively uses technology to strengthen a student's learning experience." Digital learning encompasses so-called online learning, but also includes a wide spectrum of technological tools and practices. Critical elements include an emphasis on high-quality instruction and access to challenging content, feedback through formative assessment, opportunities for learning anytime and anywhere, and individualized instruction to ensure that all students reach their full potential to succeed in college and a career. It is important to note that the strategies will look different in each district setting, and are constantly evolving.

This interactive profile demonstrates how one school district successfully responded to explosive growth in student enrollment by undertaking a collaborative strategic planning process that covered a full spectrum of issues to improve learning.

The Dysart Unified School District (Dysart) in Arizona covers 140 square miles and serves numerous communities, including the cities of Surprise and El Mirage and some unincorporated areas of Maricopa County. At one time the fastest-growing school system in Arizona, Dysart has tripled in size since 2000. The district continues to grow, and in School Year (SY) 2010–11, the student population was just over 24,000, compared to approximately 7,000 in SY 2001–02.[1]

Digital Learning Day 2013: Dysart Unified School District

> Really, this can happen in any district, in any school. What we found is it's about the process. It really isn't about developing a technology plan and then saying, "This is it. This is what we're buying and this is what we're doing." It was quite the opposite for us. We began by saying, "What has to happen in this district to drive student achievement?" So it wasn't a plan to use technology; it was a plan to increase student achievement and support their success.
>
> – Superintendent Gail Pletnick,
> Dysart Unified School District

Dysart's diversity in terms of income and race/ethnicity has increased along with its population. During SY 2010–11, the student population was 52 percent white, 35 percent Latino-Hispanic, 9 percent African American, 3 percent Asian, and 1 percent Native American. Thirty-eight different native languages are spoken by students in the district. Additionally, there are eleven Title 1 schools. Growing from four K–8 schools and one high school in 2000, Dysart now administers nineteen K–8 schools, four comprehensive high schools, one early childhood education center, one alternative program, and one learning center that houses specialized programs.[2] According to the Arizona Department of Education, 48.56 percent of Dysart students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch.[3] An *Arizona Republic* newspaper analysis showed that the number of Dysart students who qualify for free lunches increased 18 percent over a recent three-year period.[4]
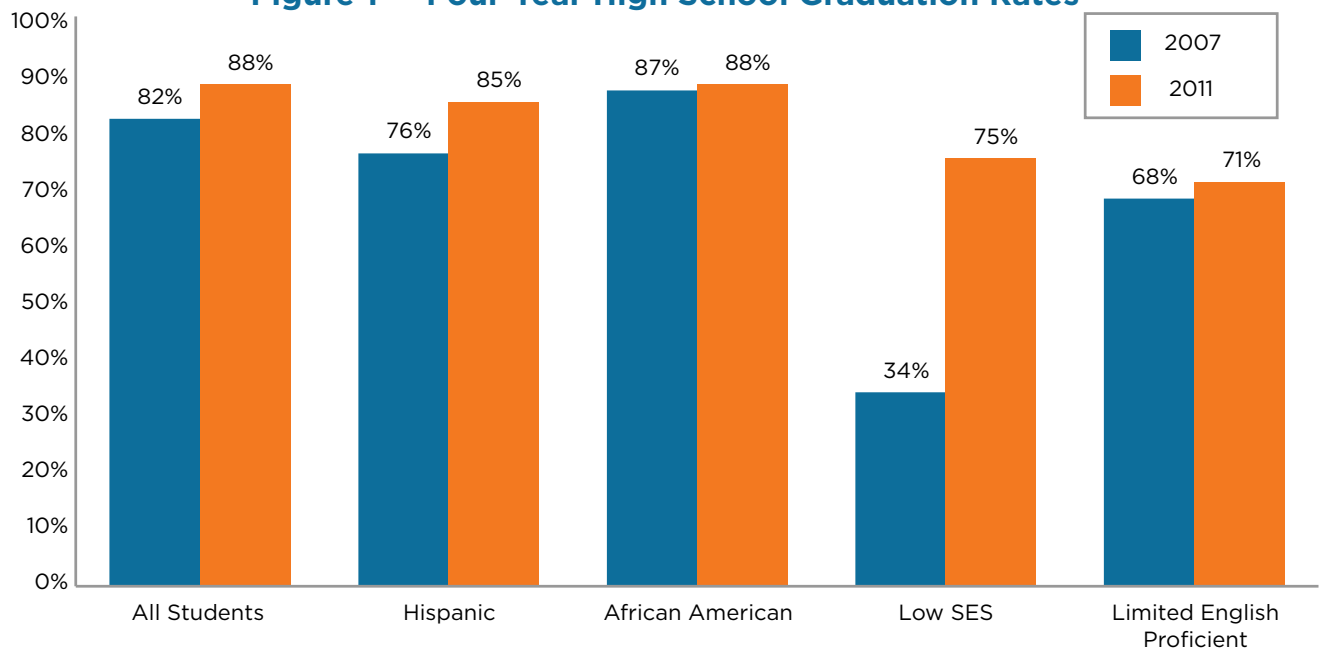
Faced with the significant increase in enrollment, Dysart began a strategic planning process to improve student learning outcomes in the district while also addressing major capacity issues caused by the higher number of students. Helping students graduate with "new century," or deeper learning, skills, and qualify for postsecondary opportunities was the fundamental Dysart goal.

> The Dysart Unified School District will produce students who are future ready for life in a globally competitive society.
>
> – Dysart Unified School District,
> "2011–14 Strategic Plan"[5]

Focusing on the strategies best able to improve student achievement, Dysart's inclusive and collaborative process involved parents, students, educators, administrators, and business and community leaders. The strategic planning was not driven by the idea of simply utilizing technology; instead, the ultimate goal of better student learning led to the development of strategies that used technology and digital learning to improve student outcomes.
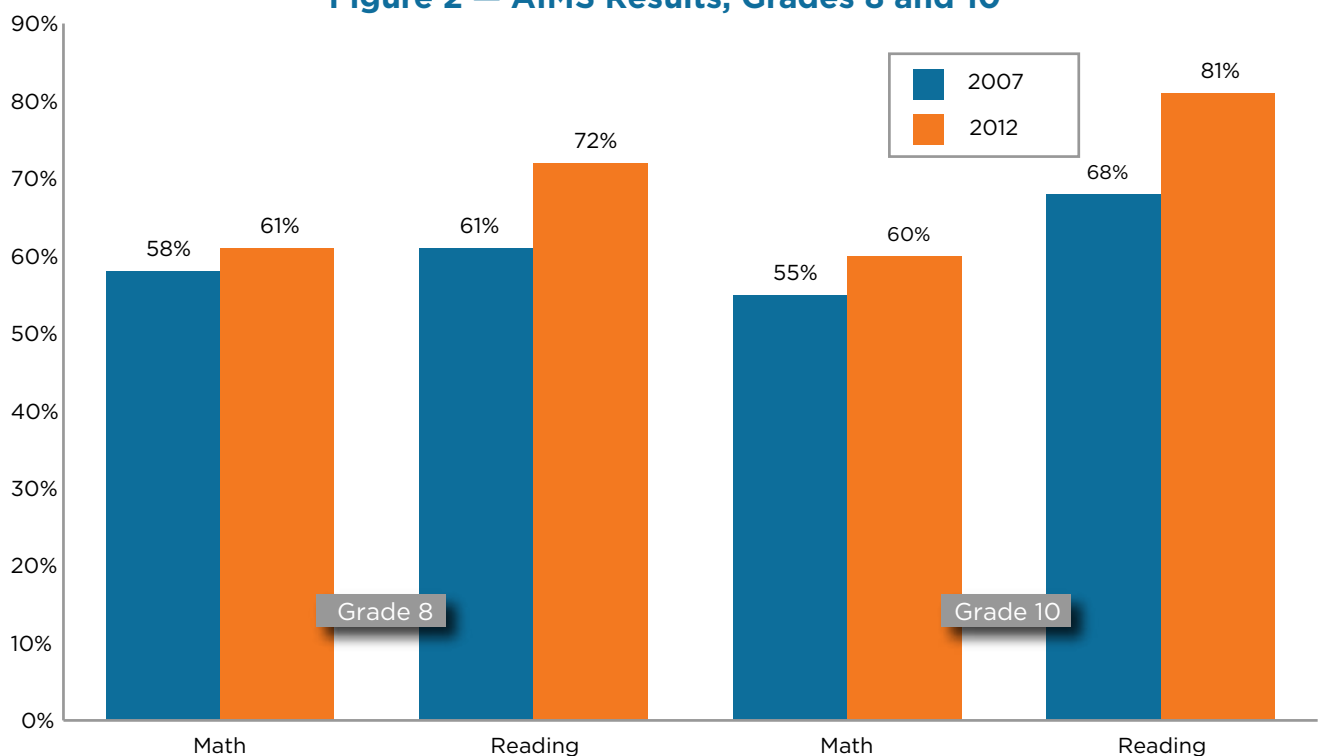
Figure 1 — Four-Year High School Graduation Rates

	2007	2011
All Students	82%	88%
Hispanic	76%	85%
African American	87%	88%
Low SES	34%	75%
Limited English Proficient	68%	71%

Source: Arizona Department of Education, Graduation Rates, http://www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/graduation-rates/ (accessed July 1, 2013).

As indicated in Figure 1, graduation rates have improved for all students by 6 points since 2007. Graduation rates for students with a low socioeconomic status have improved significantly, increasing by 41 percentage points during a four-year period. Likewise, there have been improvements in math and reading for grades eight and ten under the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) assessment, as Figure 2 shows. Gains in math have been particularly high for eighth graders, who improved by 11 points between 2007 and 2011, while tenth graders improved by 13 points. State test scores have increased every year, and gains were larger than the state average.[6]

Figure 2 — AIMS Results, Grades 8 and 10

	2007	2012
Grade 8 Math	58%	61%
Grade 8 Reading	61%	72%
Grade 10 Math	55%	60%
Grade 10 Reading	68%	81%

Source: Greatschools.net

Alliance for Excellent Education

Dysart has also made considerable progress in the No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) evaluations. In 2006 only four schools out of sixteen in the district made AYP. By SY 2010–11, sixteen out of twenty-four schools were meeting AYP. The district is committed to working toward greater student achievement in all schools and focusing on meeting all of the AYP indicators in the future.[7]

Dysart's growing and diverse student population is a challenge that many districts face, but Dysart used the changes as an opportunity to try new instructional strategies that would promote higher student achievement and deeper learning skills. An additional challenge facing Dysart is Arizona's policy of funding following students. This gives students the option to decide whether to attend a traditional public school or another alternative, such as a publicly funded charter school. This open enrollment policy forces public schools to compete with other education entities for students. Since going through the strategic planning process, Dysart has maintained an 86 percent retention rate, underscoring that students are choosing to attend Dysart rather than being forced to attend out of necessity.[8]

SUMMARY OF STRATEGIC PLAN

Dysart undertook the strategic planning process to create what it called a "roadmap of excellence" for subsequent decisionmaking, to enable Dysart students to exceed the required standards and be prepared for future success.[9]

The resulting plan focused on five main areas:[10]

1. Primary goal of student achievement
2. Leadership and administration
3. Dysart culture
4. Safety and wellness
5. Resources

Additionally, Dysart emphasizes the importance of supporting individual learning needs by utilizing reliable data from assessments. Dysart's data systems provide teachers and students with important learning tools and opportunities, including intervention, extension, and enrichment, to ensure that all students achieve at least one year's academic growth. Through these methods, Dysart works to graduate all of its students prepared for success in life. Meeting that challenge requires the district to develop plans to use resources in a manner proven to realize increased student achievement.[11]

Taylor Tracey, Student

Marley Park Elementary

Spotlight

In 2010 Dysart's strategic planning efforts were rewarded when it was named a "Salute District" by the National School Boards Association Technology Leadership Network. The award recognized Dysart's use of technology to promote student achievement, the main goal of the strategic plan.[12]

Understanding the need for a flexible process in which subsequent adjustments to a final plan may be necessary is an important part of the Dysart strategic plan. *The Dysart philosophy is that even unforeseen results provide an opportunity for constant learning by teachers and their students. Teachers are encouraged to be innovative, but the goal behind any experimentation must align with the strategic plan.*[13]

> **All Dysart students will graduate ready for college, career, and life in a globally competitive economy by mastering New Century Learner Skills.**
>
> – Dysart Unified School District, "2011–14 Strategic Plan"[14]

COLLABORATION: WORKING TOGETHER TO PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

Avoiding a rigid top-down approach, Dysart's strategic planning process was a collaborative effort involving administrators, teachers, school district staff, parents, students, and community leaders. This inclusive process developed both a strategic plan and a contract with the community that serves as a road map for better student learning.[15] The planning participants were divided into action teams to review key data points (such as student achievement data) in order to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the district and seek out best practices to inform future decisionmaking. Particular data was sought to determine what a twenty-first-century learner needs to succeed in modern society.

> **Collaboration is a part of the culture, and because of that, when we set out to develop something or we're working on curriculum, assessments, new programs, we really have a team approach, and the team involves all of the people that are certainly closest to that work, which means our teachers, but also we collaborate across our departments.**
>
> – Superintendent Gail Pletnick, Dysart Unified School District

Gail Pletnick
▶
Superintendent

The action teams identified current gaps in learning and goals for future progress. To ensure accountability, a timeline, student achievement indicators, and measures of success that could be used to benchmark progress were included in the plan.[16] For example, one major objective was to implement strategies that provide intervention, extension, and enrichment so each student achieves at least one year's growth (OYG). Dysart measures its district accountability in this example by determining whether 90 to 100 percent of Dysart students are meeting OYG in all classes.[17]

Other key components of the plan include implementing a communication mechanism for seeking frequent advice from educators, parents, students, community and business leaders, and administrators on important topics, including quality of customer service, implementation of a school district safety plan, the need for adequate resources to meet student achievement goals, and the allocation of available resources to meet the plan's goals. Using the strategic plan as a guide to establish funding priorities for budgeting purposes is crucial.[18]

Transparency is a key part of the strategic plan.[19] At monthly district school board meetings, where students provide demonstrations of their work, district leaders and the larger community are kept informed about what is going on in the schools and what progress is being made. This public display

gives the entire community an opportunity to see concrete results of the shift from traditional instruction to one that uses digital learning and technology.
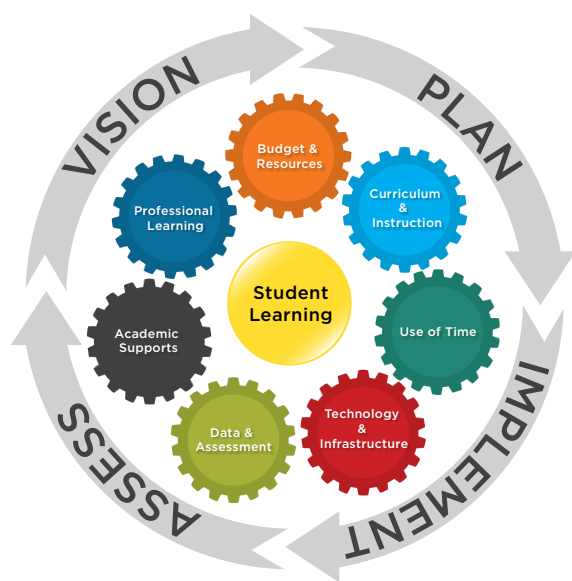
Figure 3: Project 24 Gears[20]

All of the primary focus areas in Dysart's strategic plan align with the seven gears of the Project 24 framework developed by the Alliance for Excellent Education. Like Dysart's main goal, Project 24 is also focused on the end result of better student achievement and learning. Dysart is addressing professional learning, budgeting, technology and infrastructure, student supports, data and assessment, use of time, and curriculum and instruction in its strategic planning. Recognizing the importance of continual growth and adaptation, Dysart has also embraced Project 24 as its strategic plan continues to evolve and has signed up for the effort as a way to continue its progress, look at what other districts are doing, and make adjustments for the future.

As an integral part of the strategic planning process, teachers' participation is constantly sought by district officials. For example, administrators hold brown-bag lunch meetings and informal focus groups with teachers to solicit feedback. Questions discussed at these gatherings might include "What are the greatest accomplishments of the district?" and "What needs to change going forward?" Dysart Superintendent Gail Pletnick openly encourages teachers to take risks, allowing them to continually learn in a positive environment that provides support and constructive criticism.[21] Providing teachers with robust professional learning opportunities, mentoring, and collaboration is vital for the success of the strategic plan.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Instructing students to help them achieve what the district defines as twenty-first-century learning skills requires highly skilled teachers with the ability to teach in new and different ways and to use technology as an effective learning and data aid. Dysart supports teachers with sustained teacher training, professional learning communities, and the "innovation ambassadors" program, which places a skilled educator in each school to work hand in hand with the teaching staff.

Professional development (PD) is offered in various ways to provide teachers with different options to offer improved instruction and raise student achievement. Via Dysart's "PD in PJs," teachers can take classes online at any time. They can also participate in training offered during professional development days at school, or go to the district office to receive special training. This training is not just another mandate to be met; rather, it is designed to be relevant to the teacher by addressing specific needs identified by them in the classroom or through their involvement in professional learning communities.[22]

> Dysart hasn't just spent money on technology devices—they have invested in the professional development necessary to create a culture where teachers are both proficient and comfortable using technology in a classroom setting. What they have been able to do in this area is particularly remarkable given where they were a decade ago.[23]
>
> – Ann Flynn, director of educational technology, National School Boards Association

INNOVATION AMBASSADORS

Sunshine Darby

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Technology Training Supervisor

One of the key tools to help teachers was the creation of the "innovation ambassadors" program. Innovation ambassadors serve as specialists in each school assisting with the important intersection of technology and teaching. Far more than just technology assistants, innovation ambassadors assist teachers in the classroom by piloting new and innovative instruction that utilizes technology. (For example, they might experiment with using QR, or quick response, codes to design mini lessons for students in mathematics to help them pass the AIMS test.)[24] Innovation ambassadors also regularly receive specialized training, which they then share across the district.[25]

Principals are tasked with picking the best candidates to become innovation ambassadors for their school. Technological skill is not the main requirement; the ability to communicate effectively and to build relationships with other teachers while also collaborating with the school principal and leadership team is considered the main ingredient for success.[26]

Innovation ambassadors are often the first educators in the district to try new learning strategies, applications, resources, or tools. After first going through training, innovation ambassadors bring what they have learned back to their school to share with their colleagues. For example, Tracy Anderson is the media specialist and innovation ambassador for Shadow Ridge High School. A former classroom teacher, she understands the needs of teachers and the importance of mentoring, professional learning, and collaboration opportunities. One of her most important functions is helping individual teachers learn how to integrate two or three different content areas into one project using technology as a tool to provide more engaging ways to stimulate student learning.[27]

Dysart is home to Kristi Martorelli, the Arizona Educational Foundation's 2012 Arizona Teacher of the Year. Martorelli is a reading interventionist for grades K–3 at Thompson Elementary School.[28]

Besides providing professional development to incorporate technology in the classroom, innovation ambassadors also work with the instructional growth teacher, who collaborates with other teachers to support student learning through implementation of effective practices, coaching, and the provision of ongoing professional development. Innovation ambassadors also monitor and provide training for teachers' web pages, and showcase technology being used by students. One of the innovation ambassador's most important responsibilities is to help teachers test new technologies that they want to try in their classrooms. This interaction often involves co-teaching until the technology is fully integrated into instruction. In many districts teachers do not receive this level of support and are often isolated in their efforts to effectively incorporate technology into teaching and instruction, whereas in Dysart this is a collaborative team experience.[29]

Tracy Anderson

Media Specialist & Innovation Amb.

Dysart's strategy also encourages student innovation. Students who come up with ideas are supported by the innovation ambassadors. For example, Adam Brachman, an eighth-grade language arts teacher who is also the innovation ambassador at Marley Park Elementary School, says that when a student is developing his or her own ideas, the roles are reversed and the student becomes the teacher, albeit under clear guidance from the classroom instructor. Brachman encourages his students to be innovative; he creates a classroom culture in which it is clear that they have a say in what happens as they learn. He outlines clear expectations for students through means such as project rubrics that provide guidance to the students but are also flexible and allow them to offer their own advice and perspective on their learning process. Brachman encourages his students to tell him why they want to do a project a certain way. If they make a valid argument, he allows them to go forward with their idea.[30]

In addition to promoting the effective use of technology in the schools and assisting classroom teachers, innovation ambassadors also play an important role in ensuring that district funds are spent to promote the strategic plan goal of better student learning. They accomplish this task through their work on a technology "test drive" process (discussed in greater detail below) and classroom experimentation that occurs before any technology is bought for the school or at the district level.

BUDGET AND RESOURCES

Like most districts around the nation, Dysart faces the task of implementing the Common Core State Standards while contending with dwindling resources and a declining budget. These challenges, coupled with the vast growth in student enrollment and the goal to improve student achievement, forced Dysart to look at new purchasing models as part of its strategic planning process.[31] One strategy the district has adopted to make the best use of its resources is test-driving devices and instruction methods before they are purchased on a larger scale. Dysart's innovation ambassadors experiment with potential technology tools to see if they can be adapted to classroom use that improves student learning and achievement.

Gail Pletnick
Superintendent

Dysart follows a unique approach when going through the budgeting process. Instead of looking at the funds they have available and then buying what they can afford, Dysart first explores the end goal and then determines what steps are needed to reach it. This strategy leads the district to look at the best ways to allocate resources to meet the goal. Through experimentation by innovation ambassadors and classroom teachers, technology is utilized to look for new and creative ways to offer instruction while spending resources wisely.[32]

When purchase requests arrive at the district office, the district staff ask how it is going to be used and for what purpose. There must be an academic plan for every item purchased. The technology is then tested by the innovation ambassador, who in turn works

> ### Innovate, but don't speculate.
> – Superintendent Gail Pletnick, Dysart Unified School District

with the teachers on the best way to use it. This process of "budget judiciousness," as Superintendent Pletnick describes it, allows Dysart to make smart purchases that drive student achievement while using limited resources.[33]

DYSART'S BUDGET JUDICIOUSNESS

- Establish goals around learning outcomes, *not* technology products.
- Do not spend financial or human resources that do not support established strategic goals.
- Do not spend money without a plan.
- Use technology as a solution that helps increase efficiencies and effectiveness in delivering services to students as well as staff.
- Repurpose and reorganize to meet priorities.
- Do not forget about the infrastructure.[34]

In the last four years, Dysart's budget was cut by $54 million, and there are no capital funds. This has led the district to make budget changes such as reducing custodial services and work calendars, limiting educator travel, and reorganizing and cutting staff. Dysart also lost revenue when builder donations ceased after the housing market crashed; at one time, for each new home constructed in the area builders donated approximately $1,000 to the district, which helped offset growth needs.[35]

Determining how to allocate funding to support the strategic plan's initiatives was a valuable tool for the district. Thinking strategically, asking key questions, and involving all of the key strategic planning participants in the process has allowed Dysart to offer more creative and innovative instruction and given more value to the funds that are expended. Continuing to collaborate inside and outside the district —such as participating in Project 24 to learn more about other strategies being implemented by other districts across the nation—is important to ensure that funds are being spent in the best way.[36]
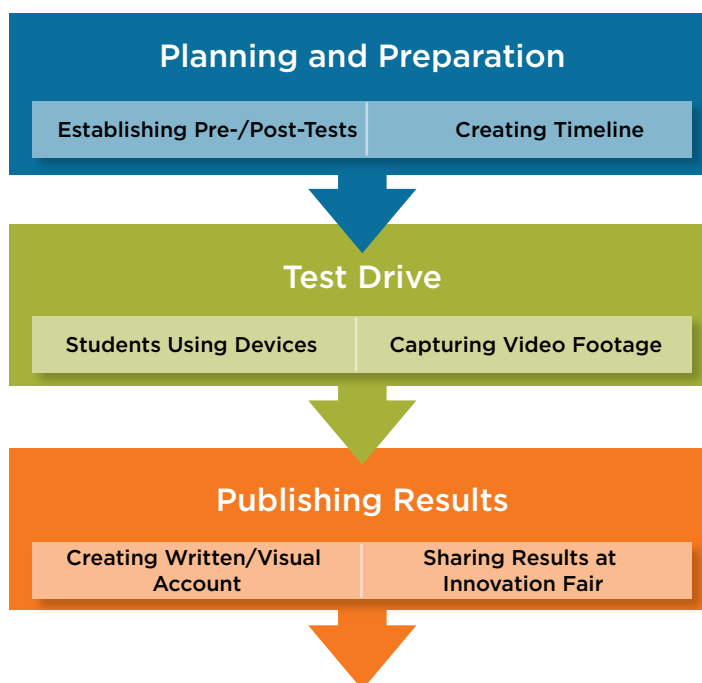
Tech

TECHNOLOGY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

An essential component of the strategic plan is that every resource must support the goal of improved student achievement. Dysart does not mandate any one particular type of technology. Instead, the district recognizes that various types of tools may be successful for improved student learning depending on the needs. This philosophy leads to careful thought and study not only in the budget process before purchases are made or resources are expended, but also in the analysis of what technology is needed to meet student achievement goals.

Tracy Anderson

Media Specialist & Innovation Amb.

TECHNOLOGY TEST DRIVE

Figure 4: The Technology Test Drive Process[38]

Planning and Preparation

| Establishing Pre-/Post-Tests | Creating Timeline |

Test Drive

| Students Using Devices | Capturing Video Footage |

Publishing Results

| Creating Written/Visual Account | Sharing Results at Innovation Fair |

The technology test drive program has become an integral way of promoting innovation by teachers while simultaneously determining if the technology they are using will work. This approach allows teachers to purchase and use a small number of devices and see if they make a difference in teaching and learning before they buy them for the entire school or district. If the new device works, it can be approved for school or district use; if it fails, the district does not expend additional resources on a product that does not meet the student learning goals of the strategic plan.[39]

From the Field: Dysart Unified School District

Spotlight

In 2012, Dysart was one of only four districts across the nation selected by the National School Boards Association to host a Technology and Learning Site Visit.[40]

Through the technology test drive, innovation ambassadors learn from each other when a tool or learning strategy has passed the litmus test for school- or districtwide use. Once the item has been approved, innovation ambassadors can prepare for the teacher training required to make it successful in their school. This approach helps Dysart avoid the common pitfall of allocating money for devices without knowledge at the district level about what was purchased or how teachers will use it to improve student outcomes. For example, Sunshine Darby, Dysart's technology training supervisor, asks a series of questions when purchase requests are received, including how the technology will be integrated into the learning experience and how it will make a difference in student learning. She also considers the logistics of the technology, such as required safety and security measures, how much support the teachers will need to use it, and whether it requires special technical expertise to keep it functioning.[41]

Kaylee Bow
Student

Before we go in, jump in, both feet, we shoot bullets before the cannonball, and a test drive allows us to do that. It allows us to go in and really measure the effectiveness of that piece of equipment or that tool before we commit to it, and then it allows us again to gather some data and tweak some things before we commit to it as well.

– Superintendent Gail Pletnick, Dysart Unified School District

BRING YOUR OWN DEVICE

Dysart does not rely solely on district-purchased technology to help drive improved student learning. The district has also enacted an acceptable use policy that allows students to bring their own devices to schools as long as they are being utilized for learning. This "bring your own device," or BYOD, policy gives the district greater latitude in ensuring that all students have access to technology for learning. To address the challenges of securing and monitoring how students are using devices, students must access the internet through each school's filtered, protected wireless network. Teachers also monitor student use of devices to ensure that they are being used for learning and not serving as a distraction.[42]

The BYOD policy has been in effect for several years and has created another mechanism to help guide and support student achievement.[43]

Support

ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

Dysart strives to create an environment that prepares students to be college and career ready. Since the inception of the strategic plan in 2008, there has been an increase in the number of students who are able to progress into postsecondary opportunities that reflect development of deeper learning skills. With a graduation rate of 88 percent—well above the state average of 77.9 percent[44]—the district started tracking the number of scholarships

that students earn to attend college. Particular focus on college and career readiness also emerged at the middle school level through the formation of a middle school committee to support seventh-grade students in developing plans for college and beyond. As students work from an interest inventory that guides their plans and strategies to meet their goals, school staff are able to provide relevant opportunities that support the students when they transition to high school. For example, architecture and engineering programs at various district high schools are available to help students pursue careers after they graduate.[45]

Spotlight

Dysart was only the second school district in Arizona to be recommended for districtwide accreditation through the AdvancED accreditation process.[46]

TECHNOLOGY SUPPORTS LEARNING FOR *ALL* STUDENTS

Effective application of technology supports different academic settings at Dysart. Teachers have found greater student engagement with digital tools, and these findings are supported by ongoing formative assessments.[47] Technology levels the playing field for students of varying abilities. In addition to supporting mainstream classroom teaching and enrichment, digital learning also supports specialized learning opportunities for students with disabilities. (For example, students with disabilities are able to use applications to help learn multiplication. Students using the technology had an increase in engagement over traditional instructional means; teachers gave tests before and after the program so they could see the growth in student achievement and the success that the effective use of technology could provide.)[48]

> Students of any ability level, when they come into the classroom, and on day one, they can see that they can be successful with this class using the technology that we have, and the different tools that we have. They think they're very, very fortunate, which is really kind of uncommon in today's high school student.
>
> – Scott Thomas, architecture design teacher, Shadow Ridge High School

Adam Brachman
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Teacher & Innovation Amb.

Dysart's approach to digital learning also supports students in developing digital literacy skills that can be utilized outside the classroom. Teacher Adam Brachman notes that it is important to recognize the modern world in which students are growing up. One important support the schools can offer is to teach students not only how to use the technology to learn, but also how to use it correctly and with integrity.[49] These important academic support systems are aided in great part by how the district incorporates data into personalized learning for all students.

Data

DATA AND ASSESSMENT

Providing teachers with good student data is at the heart of Dysart's strategic plan. Teachers use data from technology-driven assessments to plan how to teach their students and provide a more personalized approach tailored to the needs of each learner.

Sunshine Darby

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Technology Training Supervisor

iPAL: WHAT DATA DO TEACHERS NEED TO SUPPORT THEIR STUDENTS?

Dysart has developed its own instructional management system to provide important data for teachers and staff districtwide. An electronic storehouse that includes student data, curriculum and curriculum resources, and professional development information, the iPAL system—"I plan, I assess, I learn"—has analytic tools that allow teachers and administrators to analyze programs. Teachers are able, for example, to determine the effectiveness of professional development and judge whether it is improving student achievement by looking at all phases of the data generated by the system and matching the data with the curriculum.[50] The iPal system also provides student achievement data that can be sorted by school, grade level, and individual student. The system currently provides data from AIMS, Azella, Dibels, district benchmark tests, and TerraNova.[51]

> The basis for the iPAL system is how to improve student learning by personalizing it. When iPAL was developed, it was based on a simple premise: What data do teachers need to support all of their students? Asking what the teachers need rather than mandating is key to the success of the data collection.
>
> – Superintendent Gail Pletnick, Dysart Unified School District

THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS AND BEYOND

Dysart leaders consider data systems such as iPAL to be essential as the district moves forward with plans for the implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) assessments. Particular focus is on professional learning opportunities to assist teachers with the data that will be generated by the assessments.

Considerable effort is being undertaken by Dysart to ensure that the technology required for the transition to CCSS is in place and ready to go and that there are enough devices available for all students to log in and take the new assessments.[52]

PROTECTING STUDENT PRIVACY AND PROVIDING SAFETY

As with most districts across the nation, privacy and security concerns to protect student and district data are a focal point for Dysart. Compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) are built into the data plan. Collaboration among departments helps protect student data and privacy. Data project teams include the IT personnel who provide input on access and restriction issues. To help address privacy and security concerns, Dysart's approach is to initiate pilot projects, conduct focus groups, and receive

input on critical concerns. This process allows the district to communicate with the involved participants and determine how their concerns will be addressed. Future plans for data collection include combining intranet and internet access and utilizing cloud computing to increase access and cost savings. The district is currently working on improving its data systems to provide more access for parents.[53] Real-time data provided by technology-enabled assessments is one of the key tools Dysart is using to help students master their academic pursuits.

Time

USE OF TIME

The effective use of technology and digital learning allows Dysart to offer more extended and nontraditional learning opportunities, giving students more options to pursue their academic work through anytime, anywhere learning. Finding new ways to maximize time through the use of real-time data also helps teachers personalize learning for their students, allows for intervention when necessary, and helps prevent student deficiencies through early tracking provided by the iPAL data system and other assessment tools.[54]

COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING OPTIONS

In contrast to the traditional "seat time" method of advancement based on the amount of time a student is physically present in class, competency-based learning allows students to advance as they demonstrate mastery of a subject. Students who are excelling can move on when they have demonstrated mastery of a subject while students who require more time will receive assistance and only progress when they are ready.[55]

Part of Dysart's long-term strategy is embracing more learning options that are competency based. These strategies include moving to competency-based grading practices and offering signature academic programs such as architecture and engineering classes in some of the high schools.[56] Additionally, two middle schools offer engagement with Cambridge Academy, an international academic program sponsored by Cambridge University in England.[57] Superintendent Pletnick says that when learning time is maximized, it provides for increased opportunities for personalization, authentic learning, and real-life application.

The district also participates in Arizona's "Move On When Ready" program,[58] a competency-based initiative featuring multiple education pathways for personalizing learning for students enrolled in the program. Offering a competency-based diploma called the Grand Canyon Diploma, about thirty high schools across Arizona voluntarily participate.[59] Superintendent Pletnick says that there is strong support for this new program, which allows students to sit for exams when they are ready and move ahead to the community college level or other advanced training instead of being constrained by arbitrary time requirements.[60]

Tya Rowitz

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Student

ONLINE CLASSES PROVIDED THROUGH THE DYSART ISCHOOL

Dysart also established certain programs such as iSchool, the district's online school, which offers students an alternative to taking either standard classes or courses for credit recovery. Students may attend iSchool full- or part-time. Some students stay on track for graduation by taking the online school's remediation classes while other students benefit from the online learning enrichment opportunities. The classes are free of charge and taught by highly qualified, Arizona-certified teachers who are Dysart employees. All classes meet the Arizona curriculum content standards. The students' grades earned through iSchool transfer to their local school.[61]

Students taking a class through iSchool can work on their own as long as they maintain a minimum required pace set for each class, as determined by due dates set for the individual course. Students taking online classes for credit recovery are offered a pre-test for each unit of the subject. If they pass the pre-test with a 75 percent or better score they can skip that unit and move on to the next one, letting them maximize the use of their learning time to focus on the areas of greatest academic need.[62] The iSchool program offers thirty-nine different courses. Since it began offering online instruction, approximately 1,300 students have taken at least one class through iSchool.[63] Offering alternative instruction options that include flexibility through anytime, anywhere learning is an important component to fostering twenty-first-century deeper learning skills for all Dysart students.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Curriculum

Improved student learning is the fundamental goal of Dysart's strategic plan. A critical element is offering a curriculum designed to deliver important deeper learning skills for students to succeed in the modern world. Determining how to meet that goal has required Dysart to gather information on what core competencies are needed for students to be successful in the modern workplace.[64]

Scott Thomas
▶
Architecture Design Teacher

PROFILE OF A COLLEGE- AND CAREER-READY HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE

As part of the strategic plan, the College and Career Readiness Advisory Committee was formed in April 2013. The committee includes business, government, and community leaders, parents, teachers, students, administrators, and district staff. The committee was charged with developing a profile of the skills needed for a Dysart graduate who is fully prepared for college or a career. A graduate must be a global citizen, self-directed, a collaborator, civil, creative, tech literate, a communicator, and a critical thinker. The committee also developed a set of recommendations.[65]

> I really feel like the technology is so critical to our kids today because we don't even know what jobs are going to exist when our students graduate.
>
> – Sunshine Darby, technology training supervisor, Dysart Unified School District

ADVISORY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Determine common definitions for the profile skills and establish how to assess the skills.
- Determine the connections to what is currently in place in the district.
- Communicate the profile and build community consensus of what this profile means for a Dysart student.
- Embed the profile skills throughout the curriculum, through professional development and training, and in instructional resources across all grade levels and content areas.
- Recognize and utilize training resources and staff to support delivery of education that addresses profile skills.

- Establish common and coordinated expectations for the skills to be embedded across all learning environments.
- Provide for continual research and collaboration with effective models for addressing these profile skills.[66]

DEVELOPING PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Problem solving is a critical deeper learning skill that students need to possess to be successful in the twenty-first century. Through a survey circulated throughout the district, problem solving was identified as a crucial concern for students, parents, and teachers. The strategic plan, now in its third revision, carries very specific objectives to embed these new skills in the curriculum and assessments.[67]

Ryan Verpooten

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Student

Spotlight

Ryan Verpooten is enrolled in Shadow Ridge High School's Signature Architecture Program (SAP) SkillsUSA Career and Technical Student Organization (CTSO). Ryan was a gold-medal winner at the 2012 SkillsUSA Championships in Architectural Drafting Skills. He was the first sophomore contestant in forty-seven years of competition and the youngest national champion.[68]

Dysart students benefit from deeper learning skills due to the integration of different classes and academic subject areas to support project-based learning. The architecture class at Shadow Ridge High School has conducted a number of joint projects, including working with an English class focusing on William Shakespeare. Students from the English class educated the architecture students on the works and history of Shakespeare while the architecture students helped the English students design a replica of the famous Globe Theater, which hosted Shakespeare's plays.[69] Such a merging of different academic pursuits in project-based learning is a good example of the type of deeper learning experiences Dysart offers through modern instructional models.

DRIVING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Improving learning outcomes for a rapidly growing student community is the soul of the strategic plan for Dysart. The goal was to identify means for delivering improved student learning that reflect twenty-first-century key competencies. According to Superintendent Pletnick, fundamental questions at the heart of improving the plan include: What are the learning goals the district needs to meet? What resources are going to be required to get the district to meet those goals? Pletnick emphasizes that the plan was never about simply using technology; it was focused on increasing student achievement and success.[70] Through the collaborative and evolving process developed through their efforts, Dysart is a role model for other districts striving to move to a twenty-first-century learning model that allows students to develop deeper learning skills that will make them more successful in college, career, and life. Modeling Dysart's strategy to transition to a more modern instruction system that offers great teaching supported by robust data and driven by technology is paramount for all districts around the nation and the future success of all students.

Gail Pletnick

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Superintendent

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