

## Imagining Relevant Education

As the Principal of Newfield High School, it is my responsibility to build relationships with and get to know all of our students and families. As a public servant, it is my responsibility to use my professional experience and expertise to articulate the educational possibilities that grow out of what I learn. Combining what I have learned in my two and half years here in Newfield, what I know about the new Common Core Learning Standards, and what I know about the general direction that education is moving in at both the state and national levels, I humbly share the following notion of what relevant education in Newfield High School might look like.

Four high school students walk into their math class, put a flash drive into the computer, and stand up front at the interactive white board. On the screen are a number of detailed pie charts. One of the four students taps on the pie chart in the center and it enlarges to fill the full screen. The chart shows the economic characteristics of Tompkins County, broken down by neighborhood. Another one of the four students taps on the portion of the pie chart that represents neighborhoods with the most economic difficulties of all, and she explains that this is her neighborhood. A number of students in the classroom speak up, saying that this is their neighborhood, too.

A third member of the group closes the pie chart and opens up an aerial-view map of Tompkins County. The map is color-coded, based on the degree to which most of the people in a particular neighborhood have adequate access to regular health care and healthy food. Once again, students from the class begin to speak up, indicating their neighborhoods and what the map shows about where they live. The fourth student in the group poses the following questions to the class:

- What do you think the implications of this data are?
- How do you think things got this way?
- As citizens of Newfield, in Tompkins County, New York, what do you think we should do about the realities this data reveals?

Three other groups follow with similar presentations, one focusing on access to broadband Internet, one focusing on access to public transportation, and one focusing on the demographic distribution of successful small businesses. Each presentation ends with the group posing the same three questions.

The bell rings and the students move on to Social Studies class. As they enter the classroom, the same three questions are written on the board. The teacher begins class by circling the second question (How do you think things got this way?) and explains that each of the four groups is going to begin researching how the reality of life described by their groups' data got that way. The teacher explains that the final product of their research will require the four groups to transform the classroom into a museum that will display the data generated by each group and teach visitors about how things got the way they are.

As students finish their work for the period and arrive in English class, they learn that as they near the time when their museum is ready for visitors, the students will be expected to write persuasive essays and letters to the editor, inviting families and community members to attend the museum opening and engage in a discussion with the students about the third question: As citizens of Newfield, in Tompkins County, New York, what do you think we should do about the realities this data reveals? In the meantime, students continue working individually on their current assignment: either completing federal and state grant applications for home weather-proofing assistance or completing applications for local, national, and international summer internship programs.

This is, of course, just one small glimpse of what relevant education could look like here in Newfield. This glimpse doesn't even include the ways that Science, the Arts, Physical Education, Health, Special Education, Technology, Language, Business, and Independent Living classes could be integrated into the mix to deepen the connections and relevance of what our students are learning. I want to know what you think. Does this notion feel right to you? Is this what you would consider relevant and meaningful education for yourself, your children or your neighbors? Please send me an email, call me on the phone, or stop by to visit. Our vision continues to guide our work, but we need some help filling in the details. We are Newfield: **C**onscious, **C**onsistent, and **C**ommitted to what is best for our **C**ommunity. So, what is best for our community?