INSPIRE A GENERATION

When we met as a district staff at the beginning of the year and proclaimed our goal to be to “Inspire a Generation”, I’m sure most of us were thinking about doing the flashy kinds of things that catch one’s immediate attention but often as quickly fade as we move forward. This year’s inspirational activities have come in “under the radar” but create no small impact for our students. For example, the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is a major accomplishment for our school district. As quiet as this adoption might be to the general public, it will have a revolutionary effect on what happens in each of our classrooms, at every level of the school system. The CCSS are the curriculum goals that guide teachers as they provide learning experiences for their students. The new standards significantly “raise the bar” for learning, having the effect of imposing traditional learning standards at younger age levels and increasing expectations for higher level knowledge and skills. Commensurate with adoption of the new standards, the district has adopted new measurement instruments (tests), ones that are more appropriate for evaluating achievement of the new standards. Thus, taking the place of the state assessments are the MAP tests. Once again, this is a quiet change but a significant one that will help us better prepare our students to be successful in a technological world and better prepared for postsecondary success.

Another of the less flashy changes that have occurred this year is the adoption of the BIST behavior program in our elementary and middle schools. BIST is a behavioral management program that, we believe, will improve the learning climate in our schools by providing a continuous program of behavior management. Through this continuity, a student that moves between schools or matriculates to a new level will not have to learn new expectations and concepts. Additionally, the BIST program is designed not just to improve negative behaviors but also to help students refrain from similar subsequent behaviors through a cognitive learning process. A quiet change? Indeed. But one that can contribute to improved student achievement by reducing distractions from the learning process and providing for more time spent on instructional energies.

OK, not everything we’ve accomplish this year is without some flash. One of the more noteworthy changes that was instituted in our district this year is the new sixth grade attendance center—the Turner Sixth Grade Academy. Several reasons for initiating this structural change in our district have been promoted but the one that has had the most innovative consequence is its value as a pilot for a one-to-one computer environment. In conjunction with opening the TSGA, every sixth grade student was issued an Apple iPad tablet to use throughout their instructional day. This “pilot” has proven to be a very effective instructional strategy, receiving accolades from teachers, students, and parents alike. In fact, this pilot program has been so successful the Turner Board of Education, in December, adopted a proposed technology plan expanding the one-to-one concept to other levels.

And this brings me to the final “point of inspiration” for this article. Everyone recognizes the importance to our students of entering the technological world—whether as a worker or as a continuing student—with skills that ensures their success. The rapid change in available technology creates planning challenges to anticipating exactly what skills will be in demand as students graduate from our school system; however, it is unquestionable that technological skills and higher level thinking concepts will be
essential. In response to this awareness, the Board wisely adopted the technology proposal mentioned above. Through this five-year program, the district will gradually develop into a system where every student from sixth grade through high school will have continuous access to appropriate technology instruments such as laptops, tablets and like devices. The program also expands access to computers for elementary student use, but not at a one-to-one level.

Does this “quiet inspiration” that I’ve been describing mean I am disappointed in our first semester work? Not only am I not disappointed in the level of energy and creativity exhibited by our staff this year, I am inspired by it! The secret to conducting an inspiring program is to be energetic and creative, certainly, but also to wrap that energy in thoughtfulness, purposefulness, and consistency of direction. The actions and activities I observe throughout our district on a daily basis reinforce my belief that we are truly a teaching and learning organization that continues to “Inspire a Generation.”