“Spotlight School”

Marshall County School District

In the far western corner of Kentucky located in the small town of Benton, something special is happening at Marshall County School District (MCSD). This rural school district, separated from its neighbors by the Tennessee River and Kentucky Lake to the northeast, is home to about 4,500 students. The school district itself is made up of 12 schools, including six traditional elementary schools, two middle schools that feed into Marshall County High School, and three alternative schools. The district’s demographics are similar to those of the surrounding area: Marshall County School District’s student body reports as 95.6% White or Caucasian, 2.12% Hispanic, 1% Two or More Races, and 1% Other. The community itself is very tight-knit, with many locally-owned businesses in a bustling downtown. In terms of socio-economics, the majority of district students (52.1%) qualify for Free/Reduced Lunch program participation; roughly one in every 10 students has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) recommending services.

Personalized Project-Based Learning at MCSD

Marshall County School District breaks their learning model down into two main elements:

- **Blended learning**, which looks different as learners progress from elementary to middle school and on to high school. For example, at the elementary grade levels, this might include the use of a station rotation model; at the high school level, it might involve working on individualized digital lessons assigned through the learning management system.

- **Project-based learning (PBL)**, which has been part of the district’s vision from early on. The instructional staff has been undergoing professional development in this area for up to four years. This training, from TeachThought, has now reached all of the district’s teaching faculty.

For MCSD, the impetus for change began with looking at ways to offer more personalized learning in their highly rural area. District leadership started the change initiative in grades 3-5; they took their elementary school principals and assistant principals to see a high performing blended learning school in action. After seeing what blended learning could offer their students and families, the school leaders and district administration agreed that Marshall County had a moral imperative to find ways to offer this innovative learning style in their own education setting. They began the conversation of how they could adapt these findings in Marshall, brainstorming, holding parent and community meetings, and finding ways to make their “invitation to learning” accessible without forcing buy-in from teachers or families who were skeptical.

The Ripple Effect of Choice and Voice

Currently the district operates on a “school within a school” learning model. Students and families have the choice to opt for a traditional classroom setting or to have their child join one of the personalized, project-based “Discovery” classroom settings at the elementary school. Using flexible, multiage groupings, and flexible seating and learning spaces to match, more and more students (and their families) are opting to try this innovative model. Rather than teaching in grade-level classrooms, the teachers in these new classrooms models team-teach in ability levels. In middle school, the personalized model is called “Explore” and it includes blended learning experiences that incorporate habits of learning and social-emotional curriculum as well as digital content aligned with district standards. Finally, at the high school level, students can choose from Quest and Career Academy at the high school or remain with the traditional classroom experience. Currently, students and families can opt in or out of the model from year to year; the district holds information nights to help students and parents understand the differences between the personalized, competency-based environment that the Discover, Explore, Quest, and Career classrooms offer and the more traditional ones. The district is clear that they do not privilege or push one model over another; an announcement reads, “We do not believe one is better than the other, but we do believe that one is better than the other for your child.”

---

The pilot began with approximately 280 students opting in to the nontraditional setting; however, within three years, that number grew to over 1400. As more and more elementary students were opting for the newer model, it was leaving fewer students in the traditional classroom setting. Eventually, it seemed, the elementary schools may all be based on the personalized, competency-based learning model as the rule rather than the exception. There seemed to be more hesitation at the middle and high school levels, however, noted the Instructional Supervisor for MCSD, Ms. Abby Griffy. “We may always have a choice in middle or high school.” she stated. “We’re leaving it open-ended; it’s hard to make a strategic plan since we are leaving it to students to choose, but we strongly believe that students and families should have that choice.”

That emphasis on choice extends to the schools themselves and the building-level leaders as well. While different schools may implement the personalized, project-based learning style with different tools or digital curriculum, Ms. Griffy stated, the common elements across grade levels are an emphasis on student mastery, individualized pacing and level, and increased ownership on the part of the learner.

The district quickly learned that changes in one area often ripple out to changes in other areas. School personnel started by tearing down the walls - literally. “We combined classrooms to create large learning spaces where we could have co-teaching and flexible, multiage grouping” said Griffy. “If you are going to change how you operate and you are going to promote voice and choice, the classroom has to change as well.”

A Focus on Deep Learning
Thinking through and managing this shift in thinking, said Griffy, has been a challenge for administration. “There is no playbook,” she said. “We’ve had to really change our mindset. Five years ago, we were so focused on state testing and drilling. We were top 10 in the state for performance - but were we giving students what they needed to excel outside of school?” As part of the systemic change, the district made a commitment to what they call “Deep Learning.” In their new move to the personalized learning model, Marshall County students are encouraged to tackle real-world problems; they study a topic or learning concept through multiple lenses and use multidisciplinary approaches. Students are supported in becoming more active in their own learning, adapting assignments to address their interests and/or selecting projects and PBL tasks that are relevant to their learning goals. One student shared about his own experience, “It’s kind of better because you don’t have to rush through something… you can think about it and come back to it later.”

While test scores are not the focus of the new learning model, some teachers feel the model is doing a better job of catching struggling students and giving them the targeted instruction that they need to get back on track. “It’s been extremely positive,” said Katee Adams, who teaches in the Discovery model classroom at Sharpe Elementary. “We’re seeing those students that get lost—that fall between the cracks—actually outshining their peers.” “I’ve noticed a big difference,” said Shawn Shuring, a first-year teacher at Marshall. “Kids want to share more about what they’ve been doing outside of school...They have to think outside of the box and solve complex problems.”

When the Unthinkable Happens
On January 23, 2018, Marshall County High School experienced what is probably every educator’s worst nightmare: a school shooting took the lives of two students and injured 15 more, leaving the community heartbroken. Superintendent Trent Lovett’s statement acknowledged that as it read, in part, “I know that, as parents, our greatest fear is something happening to our children, and today that fear became a reality... Our courageous faculty and staff at all levels were outstanding in their response to today’s tragedy.”

---

2 https://www.marshall.kyschools.us/Content2/10
4 https://www.marshall.kyschools.us/Content2/10
Ms. Griffy, spoke about the impact on the students. “A lot of them felt really emotional, or really anxious about returning to campus where the incident had happened.” As a result and in response to their needs, the district accelerated their efforts and expanded their “MC at Home” program, then in its early stages. This learning option offers a homeschool partnership model to students, with the district providing online curriculum and the student’s parents providing tutoring or support as needed. The MC at Home program is housed in a computer lab and office space separate from the high school campus, and it is staffed by two regular education teachers and one special education teacher. The teachers meet virtually with their students and families via the Zoom video conference system as needed, but they also meet weekly face-to-face. In the aftermath of the shooting, as the community began to heal, this program offered a lifeline to students who desperately needed to stay engaged and connected, but who needed time before returning to a full-time, on-campus schedule. During the 2018-19 school year, MC at Home served roughly 80 students at the middle school and high school levels.

The incident also meant that working to move forward with deeper implementation and refinement of their personalized, project-based learning program had to take a backseat to the real work of grieving and healing as a school, district, town, and community. “Honestly, the rest of that year was just about picking up the pieces and taking care of each other,” said Griffy. However, said Griffy, once the new school year arrived, the district was ready to move forward and to jumpstart their work once again, starting with a big kickoff in the fall of 2018. “We’re calling it ‘Back to the Future’!” she laughed.

Marshall County is WorkReady
That deep focus on community is a key element of personalized education done the Marshall County way. The shift in education model has helped Marshall County School District connect with other area schools interested in learning more and sharing ideas and resources. Often, their rural location means that school districts can feel isolated from one another, says Griffy. This is one way of reconnecting to improve opportunities across the region, not just in one school. A start-of-year training on personalized learning included speakers from nearby Paducah Independent Schools and Trigg County Schools as well as from Eminence Schools, also in Kentucky. The school district also partners with the University of Kentucky’s Next Generation Academy and the Kentucky Department of Education Innovation Leadership Network, as well as the Leadership Design Academy.

Work Ready and Future Ready
Another school district initiative is the Marshall County “Work Ready Community” status; this certification comes from the Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet, and recognizes communities with high quality workforce conditions, such as a certain percentage of residents with two-year degrees or higher with a corresponding plan to raise that achievement level over time and a graduation rate of at least 88.9% with a plan to increase that by 10 percentage points by 2020. MCSD was a key partner in the county’s achievement of this status, one of only 25 counties out of 120 in the state to hold this designation.

At the heart of all of this work, the piece that ties it all together, is the Marshall County Future Ready Graduate Profile. The profile identifies six key components, or “Future Ready Competencies” that the district has identified for their graduating students. All programs and projects K-12 lead to developing and nurturing this overarching goal: “Each student must be able to think critically and problem solve, work productively with others, innovate, effectively communicate ideas to a variety of audiences, practice all the components of citizenship, and be of good character, along with mastering academic content.”

---

7 https://www.ksba.org/WorkReadyCommunities.aspx
8 https://www.marshall.kyschools.us/#/News/mcgradprofile#sthash.B4TkAQC.dpbs

Institute for Teaching and Leading
rethink. innovate. empower.