

CASE STUDY: VAN METER COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT



Van Meter is truly a learning community. Through a standards-based and personalized approach to instruction, students and teachers alike are mastering content and preparing to innovate and excel in a rapidly changing world.

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About Van Meter Community School District

Van Meter is a small K-12 school district located a few miles west of Des Moines and includes just 650 students. In recent years, the district has implemented a 1:1 computing initiative, standards-based grading and the beginnings of competency-based instruction through a model chemistry class.

Van Meter's size has enabled educators and district leaders to engage stakeholders at every level—including students themselves—in the development of the district's educational framework. "We involve our students in a lot of the decisions that we make," says superintendent Deron Durflinger, "because we want it to be about their learning and to create an environment that's most conducive to their overall educational experience."

Prioritizing 21st Century Skill Development

Through a series of conversations, the district identified **collaboration, communication, creativity and problem solving (the 4Cs)** as essential characteristics of successful students. "When our students graduate from Van Meter, we want them to have a skill set that allows them to be successful in anything they choose to do. We also are really involved in trying to help our students learn how to adapt to change." notes Durflinger.

Durflinger and his colleagues have instituted a digital literacy and citizenship curriculum that starts with the district's kindergartners. Librarian Shannon Miller works closely with K-5 students and teachers to support and implement the curriculum in social studies, language arts and other classrooms, helping students build digital literacy along with a love for reading and books.

Van Meter educators are also bolstering students' adaptability and communication skills through projects that connect students to learners around the country and internationally. In one class, Spanish students increase their fluency during conversations with native speakers across the world. In another, Van Meter students connected with a district in New Orleans to compare the impact of extreme weather on their local communities.

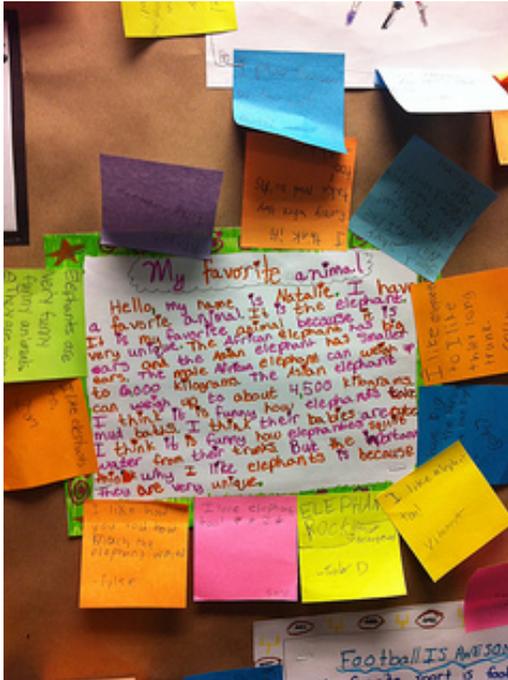


Implementing Standards-Based Instruction

"Kids want a more competency-based approach," says Jennifer Sigrist, Van Meter's Elementary School Principal and Director of Teaching and Learning. "They may not use that exact terminology, but they want to be able to show what they know and move on. They want to be challenged. We've often assumed that kids don't want to do the work, and it's quite the

opposite. They want to do meaningful work, and do it well.” Sigrist and her colleagues have responded to student demand by moving to a standards-based grading practice. Instead of getting a final letter grade, students and parents now receive a report on student progress towards specific standards in each class. “I think that it’s increased the conversations around learning, with teachers and parents, between teachers and parents, and with students taking ownership of their learning, notes Sigrist.”

In the district’s first significant step towards a competency-based curriculum, chemistry teacher Trey Armistead has made all of his lectures, assessments and assignments available online to students. Students, in turn, are able to work through the content at a pace that works best for them. Armistead’s own analysis of year-over-year assessment results indicate that this year’s students have outperformed every previous class.



what it looks like.”

Individualized Professional Development

Van Meter’s educational leaders try to use the same collaborative, learner-driven instructional model for teachers that they want to see implemented in the classroom. Teachers set their own goals based on student data and work in smaller groups towards accomplishing those goals in the way they deem appropriate. “The role of the administrator,” notes Sigrist, “just like the role of the classroom teacher, is to facilitate and help those groups, either with resources, or in keeping everyone moving toward student achievement improvement.”

Sigrist and her colleagues measure the success of these professional development strategies with a variety of tools, including the Instructional Practices Inventory and informal classroom walkthroughs. “So often, in any initiative, we let the naysayers or the ones who are slower to adapt to change, drive our professional development. And I would encourage people to do just the opposite, and have your professional development be driven by your high-flyers. Get them out in front and let them be models to let other people see

District Profile

- 650 students
- 1:1 computing initiative
- Standards-based grading
- District-wide digital literacy curriculum
- Competency-based courses
- Individualized professional development

Learn More about Van Meter Community School District’s Approach to 21st Century Learning

Review the Van Meter [Digital Citizenship, Technology and Library Science Curriculum](#)

See Van Meter “by the numbers,” including recent state assessment results, in the district’s 2012 [Annual Report to the Public](#).

Explore Van Meter’s comprehensive approach to [professional development and growth](#).

Van Meter educators are implementing the Iowa Core, which is closely aligned to the 21st Century Skills Framework in

its emphasis on critical thinking, complex communication, creativity and collaboration. See how the Iowa Department of Education defines [these skills and others](#).

Tags: [Instruction](#), [Iowa](#), [Professional development](#), [Standards](#), [Student Voice](#), [Technology](#)