





District of Choice

How a revamped curriculum and improved technology plan helped one district turn around open enrollment numbers

Shelby Anderson

In the 2008-09 school year, the Wheatland J1 School District lost 76 students to open enrollment. As a small, one-building, K-8 district with an enrollment of about 420, this was an alarming exodus. At one point, the district had the second highest net loss of funds in the state based on the percentage of its total budget.

District Administrator Jason Tadlock knew the district had to do something immediately to reverse the downward trend. What resulted is a five-year strategic plan approved by the school board that is an ambitious mix of upgrading technology, implementing rigorous curriculum, and, perhaps most importantly, changing the perception of the school.

In the classroom, the effects of this plan can already be seen. Each student in fourth through eighth grade has a laptop, there is a renewed focus on individual and classroom academic improvement, and the school's award-winning *Project Lead the Way* curriculum continues to be central to student learning.

This school year, for the first time in recent years, the district gained students through open enrollment. A tour of the school shows why students and parents are turning to Wheatland Center School.

■ Innovation and Collaboration

Students in Megan Zirbel's sixth grade class are working in pairs using Autodesk Inventor —

a professional, 3D CAD software used to design and develop new products. The students are working together to design furniture. One pair of students is developing a chair with a built in refrigerator and microwave. Another group is working on a chair with an organizer, and two other students are working on an adjustable table with a Packer logo on one side and a Bears logo on the other.

The students tackle the projects using the 9-step process:

- define the problem;
- brainstorm;
- research;
- develop ideas;
- choose the best idea;
- model or prototype;
- test and evaluate;
- improve design; and
- communicate results.

It's a process that is similar to what engineers use when developing products. Additionally, the software that the students are using is similar to what would be used in the field.



“A lot of things students are coming up with could be taken to market,” Tadlock said.

Most importantly, the project gets students to apply classroom skills like math and soft skills such as working collaboratively to a real-world project.

“The large focus is on the students’ creativity,” Tadlock said. “They are also learning to become critical thinkers and they’re learning how to work in teams.”

■ A Good Investment

The next step is Jason Creel’s fourth grade class. The students just completed a classroom activity and are amped up and excited. When the students settle into their seats, they each have a laptop on their desk. Wheatland Center School provides every student in fourth to eighth grade with a laptop to use in school and at home.

The fourth grade students in Mr. Creel’s class said they like using the computers for a number of reasons. One student said they make it easier to edit documents and homework assignments. Another student said they can easily get classroom assignments if

they miss a day because the teacher posts assignments online. Another said the laptops let her work on and share projects with other students from her class online. This allows students to work collaboratively on projects outside of the classroom.

In addition to the laptops for students, every classroom has a Smartboard and LCD projector, among other gadgets. Tadlock knows school board members and district administrators will want to know how much all of this cost the district. Overall, the technology expenses were marginal when considering that the district was no longer losing students through open enrollment. The district’s initial investment totaled \$250,000 over two years. However, in a three-year period, it has brought a return of approximately \$1.4 million due to the open enrollment impact.

Tadlock said he viewed the technology cost as an investment that would produce significant returns for the district. Harkening back to the classic baseball movie, *Field of Dreams*, Tadlock took the approach of ‘If we build it, they will come.’

“We went into this thinking, ‘If we have a quality school with

quality staff, students will come to our school,’” Tadlock said.

“The level of student engagement is so much higher,” Principal Patti Clements said. “They’re working on rigorous, relevant activities.”

Distributing a laptop to each student also levels the playing field, Clements said. Some schools utilize a bring your own device (BYOD) system. However, students who don’t have technology at their disposal lose out. Also, Clements said, the school has never had a theft of one of its laptops. She attributes it to the fact that every student in fourth grade and above has their own.

Even though the younger students aren’t given a laptop, they are trained how to use technology. Beginning in kindergarten, students are taught keyboard skills, using the mouse and other basics. In first, second, and third grades, they continue to use technology and build skills.

“When they come into fourth grade, we’re giving them a tool they know how to use,” Clements said.

■ ¿Tu Hablas Español?

In another classroom, students are working at their computers with

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giant headphones over their ears. This is the foreign language lab. Using software, students get started on the basics of just about any language they choose. Some of the languages that students are taking include familiar foreign language offerings like Spanish, French, German, but a few others are taking Korean, Hebrew, and Polish.

“The goal is to get their ear used to language, and get their pronunciation down,” Tadlock said. “They’re not going to be fluent, but they will have a nice base.”

In the language lab, students don’t just sit at their computers. The lab is staffed by teacher Thomas Hartley who takes them through different activities. The class shows off its skills, energetically reciting the Spanish alphabet in time with a YouTube video.

However, not all students are able to get foreign language time in each day. Because the foreign language lab time takes place during the student’s 30-minute Response to Intervention (RtI) block, students who need additional enrichment get RtI in their classrooms while the others go to the language lab. However, Tadlock said, students have the option of using the foreign language software through their

laptops at home if they miss a day.

■ Academic Improvement

Student success is a source of pride at the Wheatland Center School — you can see it in each classroom and in the hallways. Every student in the school sets achievement goals prior to taking the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test. Students who achieve their goals get their names painted on the Wall of Success — a large area on the hallway near the central office.

“It brings ownership of learning back to the student,” said Clements. “They really want to do well.”

Additionally, the Wall of Success is meant for all students who reach their goals — this includes students with learning disabilities.

“Students with learning disabilities who don’t always get the most recognition...they get on the wall if they improve their scores,” Tadlock said. “We have future valedictorians next to students who struggle.”

■ Sky is the Limit

A number of collaborative, online projects have evolved from the school’s 1:1 program. For example, in one project, a group of students are building a 3D model of the school.

The project has multiple students and teams involved. There is a web page, blog, and Twitter account that gives updates on the status of the project.

Another group of students is building an ancient Roman civilization. The thing about each project, Tadlock said, is that students are learning to work in teams and sharpening their history, math, and writing skills through a fun project.

Looking back, Tadlock said it’s amazing what his students and staff have accomplished since they’ve revamped their focus on technology, which he attributes to the quick and full support of the school board.

“Without the support of the school board, we wouldn’t be able to do this,” Tadlock said. “We’ve been supported by the school board the whole way.”

Back in Tadlock’s office, while showing off some of the projects his students are working on, it’s clear that Tadlock is proud of his students and staff.

“I feel we’re hitting new heights and our kids are doing amazing things right now,” he said. “I’m excited to see what they will do next.” ■

Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.