

RETHINKING THE LIBRARY

Portage High School's iCenter provides students with a place to launch their learning

Shelby Anderson



When students and parents arrived at Portage High School for the annual open house last fall, they were in for a surprise. They had been told that the library had been redesigned, but didn't know to what extent. What they discovered was the Portage High School iCenter — a space specifically designed with students' learning needs in mind.

"Parents had been in the library before, but this was a real eye-opener for them," said Portage High School Principal Robin Kvalo. "They could definitely see their own children finding this a place they want to be — a kind of a hub of the school."

Walking into the iCenter, your eyes are immediately drawn to the bright colors and the more than 70 "speech bubbles" on the walls. A variety of round tables are located throughout the space — round tables were specifically selected to make it easier for small groups of students to work collaboratively.

"The iCenter embraces the need for having a library that is more open to students," said Superintendent Charles Poches. "Students have more access to information in a comfortable setting."

The iCenter is also fitted with a "Genius Bar" where a teacher is on hand to help students with academics and answer technology questions. There is also a student tutor room, where a student is available each hour to assist other students. As far as technology, the iCenter has the requisite computers and also has a laptop lab where students can plug in and get to work.

"The iCenter is good for our district because we're finally moving in the direction that kids are," said Kristen Skolarz, school board vice-president.

"The iCenter is definitely about kids, what they need and what kind of learning space they work best in," Kvalo said.

Vision Driven

Kvalo is in her first year as principal at Portage High School but had previously served as principal at one of the school district's elementary schools for 13 years. She came into



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Portage High School with a vision to make it a place where 21st century learning leads the way.

“I wanted to come in with a vision of what I think Portage High School should look like five years from now,” Kvalo said. “And I needed to start somewhere and what better place to start than what I think should be the hub of your high school — the place where your students get information.”

Kvalo worked closely with Dahlia Werner, the high school library media specialist, and Sue Connor, the district’s director of technology. Last spring, the three colleagues attended a conference on 21st century learning hosted by the Wisconsin Education Media and Technology Association (WEMTA). At that conference, they attended a session on setting up library spaces to meet student learning needs. Kvalo said the three of them looked at each other and the light bulb went on — they knew this is where they wanted to start. After the conference, they looked into what effective learning spaces look like and where technology fits into the mix.

“We did a lot of research and everything we found addressed changes in schools, preparing students for the 21st century, and designing schools around appropriate learning spaces,” Connor said.

Learning Space for Students

All of the iCenter details were considered with the students’ learning needs in mind. Even the decision to purchase chairs with wheels was made with students in mind. Flexible learning spaces, where chairs and tables can be easily moved are more conducive to learning and collaboration.

“Kids are moving the chairs every hour, and that’s fine, it’s designed to be a flexible learning space,” Connor said.

Werner said the floor plan was also carefully considered. In addition to other changes, the iCenter has a door to an adjoining computer lab. In the high school’s old library, students could not go between the computer lab and the library. Werner said the access point makes it easier for students to utilize resources in the library when working on a project in the computer lab or vice versa. The computer lab also helps relieve some of the pressure when the iCenter is busy.

Other changes have bolstered the iCenter’s appeal. Mute colors like beige and gray have been painted over with bright green and orange colors. Furniture has been reupholstered with bright fabric and tables have been repurposed. The iCenter’s “speech bubbles” arranged near the ceiling, include sayings that are meant to inspire and encourage students to take an inquisitive approach to their learning.

In addition to designing the space with students in mind, Kvalo, Werner and Connor worked to make the project as cost-effective as possible. They recycled and re-purposed furniture and worked with a local painter to create the speech bubbles. Overall, the project cost the district about \$18,000.

Talking is Allowed

Perhaps, most importantly, Connor, Werner, and Kvalo want the iCenter to be a place that students like to be. Students can listen to music on headphones while they are in the iCenter. Part of the iCenter is also arranged in a more relaxed café-type setting, where students can meet and talk.

“You will notice the noise level will range from very silent to a little bit more energy and a little more talking, and that’s okay because this is a collaborative learning environment,” Kvalo said.

So far, the iCenter has been popular. Kvalo surveyed the freshman class and they said they like study hall because they can go to the iCenter and get caught up on school work, read, listen to music or do whatever they need to. Likewise, Connor said she heard students talking about the iCenter at the start of the school year.

“For the kids to be in the hallway and to say ‘I can’t wait to go to the iCenter, I’m going to spend all of my study halls there.’ You could tell right there that it was a big thing,” Connor said.



“We need to go where the kids are, not where we are. **We need to go where education needs to be, not where it’s been.**”

— **Robin Kvalo**, Portage High School Principal

Working with Technology

Kvalo, Werner, and Connor say the iCenter is designed to be a place where students ask questions and pursue knowledge. The district takes a similar stance with how it uses technology. Instead of banning cellphones, students are allowed to use them in school. The students are taught when and how they can use their phones in school, but school leaders recognize the learning potential in bringing mobile devices into the school.

Connor said the high school teachers have attended summer academies and professional development opportunities to get teachers to start thinking about how mobile devices can be used in the classroom.

For instance, Connor said, students can purchase a graphing calculator app for their smart phone

instead of having their parents spend \$80 on a new graphing calculator.

The high school has also opened its wireless internet to students with laptops, netbooks and tablet com-

puters. However, students are responsible for the security of their devices and can use them only in study halls, passing periods or lunch, unless a teacher allows students to use their devices in class.

Kvalo said she has made it clear to students and parents that students don’t need a device like a cellphone or laptop to maximize their learning, but she expects more students may be coming to school with tablet computers or laptops.

While some school leaders may be hesitant to allow students to bring in their own laptops and utilize an open-device format, Kvalo said, it’s about meeting the learning needs of students.

“We need to go where the kids are, not where

we are,” she said. “We need to go where education needs to be, not where it’s been.” ■

Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.



In creating the iCenter, Principal Robin Kvalo (left) worked closely with Sue Connor, director of technology (center), and Dahlia Werner, library media specialist (right).

puters. With a signed parent permission slip, students can bring their device to school, register it and then access the school’s internet anywhere