



Case Study: Maplewood Richmond Heights High School

Maplewood Richmond Heights School District, St. Louis, MO

Maplewood Richmond Heights High School

Ten years ago, Maplewood Richmond Heights high school ranked among the St. Louis area's lowest performing schools. With a 59% poverty demographic, the school had serious challenges and the low ranking only proved what administrators already knew—a dramatic shift was needed to turn things around.

Turn things around they did, and in dramatic fashion. Just last year the school was named an International Center for Leadership in Education Model School and an Apple Distinguished School. Today, they are a one-to-one laptop school with a student-mentored technology integration program and a service-learning emphasis that reflects the district's cutting-edge practices and innovative landscape. The district is nationally recognized for its sustainable practices, innovation, and academic growth.

While the high school is small—only 350 students—the transformation was big. “It started with a new way of thinking,” said Patrice Bryan, who teaches English and social justice courses. “We had progressive ideas across the district, but the way we operated in the library didn't reflect our educational landscape anymore. So we decided to align the two.”

Together, administration and staff decided that in order to get students motivated and teachers enthused about the new Research & Design Center model, the transformation should support the library becoming the vortex of learning and collaboration. “Up until this point, it was an old-school library, a hallowed hall of resources,” said Joe Hosea, resource specialist. “It was the old library model, and we realized that our innovative ideas would only blossom if we changed the old model into a true research and design center.”

Maplewood Richmond Heights was recently named one of two \$60,000 Grand Prize winners in the 2013 Follett Challenge because of its revitalization and its service learning programs. The Follett Challenge rewarded six schools with more than \$200,000 in Follett products and services in 2013. Winners were chosen for the most innovative



Students collaborate on projects in the R & D Center.

“Winning the Follett Challenge was so incredible! It is allowing us to focus on building literacy in the new Research & Design space and acquire resources that more accurately reflect what we do. We are not a rich district; we are high poverty. Yet we were able to make significant changes that are helping kids prepare for dynamic lives beyond this school. The Follett Challenge is the reward and the recognition that we're on the right path.”

— Patrice Bryan,
Teacher



programs designed to cultivate creativity, collaboration and community. The Maplewood Richmond Heights Research & Design Center was a perfect fit. As Follett COO Tom Schenck pointed out, “When we saw what this school was doing to prepare kids for college and career while giving back to its community in so many ways, we knew we had a winner.”

The Cornerstone Program

The transformation of the old library model into the new Research & Design center would not have been nearly as impactful without the district’s Cornerstone program, which began before the library’s transformation and remains the district’s guiding mission. “Our district vision is anchored by the four Cornerstones—leadership, scholarship, stewardship, and citizenship. These tenets are the undercurrent of everything we do in the district,” said Bryan.

For example, the district has three gardens that are tended to and harvested by students in their Seed to Table program, and they run a food pantry out of the high school that serves 54 people—30 of them children—with food for the weekends. The kids do it all—from building the shelves for the pantry to presenting their program to community leaders to get them on board. They also have an after-school cooking class, Mouths of Babes, for student moms in the Teen Kitchen, where the girls learn to create healthy meals from food provided by the pantry. Child care is provided by students.

“We also raise chickens and have written a book on ‘chickenology’. The chicken stewards were involved in a project to teach a village in Kenya how to build chicken coops,” Bryan explained. “And our middle school kids raise bees and sell bee products to sustain the program.” The district has an aquaculture program and is experimenting with raising fish, and they offer formal secondary courses in leadership, environmental sustainability, entrepreneurship, citizenship, and service learning. Bryan explained that the opportunities for service learning are being built into the curricula and culture of the district. “These are not just special classes taken by a select few students, it’s what our students know.”

Because the four Cornerstones are the soul of the district, they decided a great way to kick off formal social justice and service learning classes was to move those courses into the old library space to infuse new life—and with that move, the conversion of the space had begun.



Students build the shelving for the food pantry they operate.



Students work in the school’s food pantry as part of the service learning aspect of the Cornerstone Program.



Community service, collaboration, and a little chaos

Maplewood Richmond Heights staff envisioned their ultimate “library” as a true Research & Design Center (R&D), a buzzing “one-stop resource shop” for teachers and students. “We imagined a place where students and teachers can go take a mini-lesson on editing video, talk about new ideas, work together on projects, have a cup of coffee in the café and read, checkout a Flip Cam, or get help from a specialist,” explained Bryan. “These things were happening all over campus, in small groups or classes, but we wanted a hub—a center for kids and teachers to find everything and do everything together, at once. And we wanted to loosen the constraints: now you can eat in here!”

The transformation began with a mental mind shift from resource distribution and collection to a 21st-century collaboration and design model. “Everyone had to be on board with this model shift from the library as a set of specific resources and a quiet, formal space to a mindset of active community partnership and creation. This meant that we all had to acquire a new understanding: the old library as resource capital was gone; we are now focused on human capital,” said Bryan.

After a solid year of thought and planning, the next step was a physical one: moving classes and programs into the Research & Design center. “The change makers came first, but essentially, we moved the major programs all at once. We just dove in, which meant we had to rethink a lot of rules for the space. It required a big mind shift for the teachers,” Bryan explained. “There was some resistance in the beginning.” During those early days, the new R&D Center hosted English classes, the ESL program, Reading Club, the theatre program, the writing center and literacy initiatives, and the service learning program. Soon, mobile journalism migrated in and out of the space. “In the beginning, it took some getting used to. We had a lot of activities and teachers and classes, and no walls,” Bryan admitted. “Today I teach every single freshman in the social justice foundations class here, out in the open, and we have study halls going on at the same time. Kids come and conference with teachers on projects. This is how kids want to learn, and it works surprisingly well,” said Bryan.

Bryan also pointed out that the new R&D space encourages real collaboration among teachers and students, distributing the learning load across content areas, and focusing on guided inquiry design and practices of a participatory learning culture. “We focused on learning to share experiences and that leads to active info-apprenticeships within our schools, between schools, and between our schools and the community.”



Community leaders discuss projects with students in the Conversation Cafe.



Students present their projects to community faith leaders, with the goal of working together.



One of the biggest energy boosters to the new R&D space is the earlier-mentioned Cornerstone program, which hosts many events and community outreach and has infused the space with new meaning and function. "We also just launched the Semester of Service class, in which a group of students select a theme, like hunger, and research what that means in their community. They participate in expeditions that allow them to live the experience, and they present solutions, like our Weekends on Wheels pantry program, that allow them to help solve the problem for people around them," said Bryan. "These are real-world problems being experienced and approached in the R&D space by our kids, and they are driven and enthusiastic when working together on these issues."

As one Semester of Service student said, "I've learned to take initiative on the problems within my community. SOS has given me not only the perspective of issues on a global scale, but has also provided me the opportunity to start a change in my community. With SOS I've learned that in order to impact problems on a global scale, you have to start at the community level with understanding, dedication, and passion."

'A well-oiled machine that just hums'

The revitalization process has tripled foot traffic and the old-school library is a thing of the past. Maplewood Richmond Heights' R&D Center is the hip, vibrant hub of the district, and students are defining the new use of the space. They flock to traffic information and participate in school and community events. "The R&D Center really works for us. This is a place where kids can meet their resource needs and engage in activities that help them network with mentors and social entrepreneurs in the community, preparing them for a range of capstone apprenticeships," said Bryan. "It's also a place where kids participate in causes that are personally meaningful, and they learn how they can be a catalyst for change." The R&D model will expand without throwing out the value in a traditional system but embracing resource distribution through a different lens.

One example is Austin Golden, a student who is involved in the school's food pantry. Golden explained that at one time in his life, "I was one of those kids who had experienced hunger. So, I think that in this class, it's kind of like I'm giving back, and bringing my experiences to the program. Knowing that I'm helping kids going through the same struggle is something not many people can say they did."



Students work with teen mothers in the Mouth of Babes after school program, which helps young mothers learn to cook healthy meals.



Students participate in the annual Outreach Fair, to recruit new members to their cause.



The three ‘resource specialists’ in the R&D (no longer called ‘librarians’) have been specifically chosen to make this Center dynamic climate a reality. These three educators handle a wide range of resource needs in the space and keep things ‘humming along’. “This really isn’t a job for everyone,” Bryan explained. “It’s a big commitment. But if you’re the kind of educator who works well with support, creativity, freedom and independence, it’s amazing to be part of the experience.”

What does it mean to be a Follett Challenge Grand Prize Winner?

Now that the R&D Center is up and running and helping students become community and global ambassadors, it’s hard to imagine how the district might improve upon the model. But as Bryan pointed out, the goals they want to achieve loom large and there is still more to accomplish. “We want to make the R&D Center better, with a bigger shift toward everything digital,” said Bryan. “Winning the Follett Challenge will allow us to make vital improvements.” The district plans to use part of their winnings from the Challenge to purchase new interactive whiteboards for the center, as well as new ebooks and other digital resources. “Because of the ebooks, our English IV will not be the traditional pen-and-paper-textbook constrained class. They are now learning traditional skills with higher-tech media. With FollettShelf resources and the interactive whiteboards, we’ll be able to better focus on building literacy and gather the resources that more accurately reflect what we do.”

As Bryan pointed out, winning the Follett Challenge was validating. “It was really incredible. Winning this makes us realize that we are going in the right direction, and it’s been inspiring. Teachers come to me with a need and I get to say, ‘Yes, we can order what you need from Follett’ —it’s really lifted the morale around here. It’s been great for the kids, and every teacher is thrilled and inspired. I’d tell everyone who’s doing something innovative to apply for the Follett Challenge. We are small, and really didn’t think we’d win. We didn’t have the money or the resources that some wealthy schools have. But we won!”



Students visit Heifer Ranch, where they actually experience hunger in order to relate to those they are helping with their projects.

