PEAK Principles in School

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In the book *What Schools Could Be*, Ted Dintersmith provides insight on the topic of innovation in schools across America through personal experience. Dintersmith (2018) explains that in today’s world of education, “College ready impedes learning and innovation in our K-12 schools.” Schools are putting all their focus on ranking students based upon test scores, but he believes that “all students would benefit from considerably more hands-on learning.” To support this claim, within the article “Teaching Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills,” it was noted that “we should be teaching students how to think. Instead, we are teaching them what to think” (Snyder & Snyder, 2008). Ted Dintersmith spent a year traveling to all fifty states, visiting a variety of schools, elementary through college, that are not just talking about innovative educational ideas but are actually putting them into practice—something that is currently uncommon in many school systems across the United States. As he traveled, he identified four common principles that were associated with schools that students were thriving in. He called these four principles that students were developing the PEAK principles. The four principles are purpose, essentials, agency, and knowledge. Students should understand there is a purpose for their work and that it’s important. Students should also participate in experiences that foster essential skills and mindsets needed to be successful in the real world, such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving. They should create their own learning experiences and become their own advocate for their learning by setting goals, tracking their progress, and assessing their work. Lastly, students should gain and retain the knowledge they learn in order to apply it and teach others. Schools that empower students to develop these stills do exist (as referred to in Dintersmith’s book) but seem to be few and far between.

Harford Hills Elementary School is a small school located in Parkville, Maryland. We have approximately 500 students with three classes per grade level. Our school is a 1:1 school, meaning each of our students are provided with their own device to use in school. At Harford Hills Elementary School, I believe we are allowing our students to develop the PEAK values in a variety of ways. Unfortunately, as part of Baltimore County, we are still required to use test scores as acceptable means of evaluation and have not been able to fully embrace all innovative ideas; however, over the past few years, the teachers at Harford Hills have attempted to provide students with some innovative experiences.

**School Projects**

“Current areas of emphasis regarding student learning in higher education include student engagement, critical thinking, self-directed learning, authentic learning, team skill development, problem-solving skills, and interdisciplinary studies” (Klegeris & Hurren, 2011). At Harford Hills, we believe that these stills are so important to instill in our students while they are at a young age, not just at the higher education level. The teachers here provide students with lots of opportunities to complete projects that allow student choice and really showcase some of the PEAK principles.

In fifth grade, the students are required to complete a science fair project each year. They are given the assignment about halfway through the year with the final project being due at the end of the year. This project essentially is designed around the PEAK principles. Students are asked to complete an experiment that would solve a problem. By doing this, they understand that there is a purpose for their assignment. At the beginning, they also must conduct research and gain knowledge about the problem they are trying to solve and be able to support it with why this problem is an important one to solve. Technology is crucial here. For this portion of the assignment, the fifth graders complete it in class, which means each student is working on a different task that interests them. The teachers act as guides on the side as they use their devices to conduct unlimited amounts of research on their chosen topic. They must display the essential skills of problem-solving and critical-thinking while completing this project because they need to be creative in how they choose to solve their problems. They must also show perseverance because the experiments may not go as they plan, and they may have to do the experiment more than once. There is agency within this project because students are essentially creating their own learning experience while conducting their experiment. As they do this, they are recording their progress and evaluating the results throughout. Lastly, the fifth-grade students must become experts by the end of their project to share what they learned and teach their peers and other members of the school community through a visual and oral presentation.

Another project that incorporates the PEAK principles occurs in third grade. This project is titled “Invention Convention.” This project connects to the third grade ELA unit where they read about a variety of common inventions that we use on a daily basis. At the end of this unit, the third graders are asked to design their own invention and create a model of it, either independently or in a small group. There is a purpose for this project because the students are asked to solve a problem that is important to them and that they can relate to. Essential skills are present if they are working in pairs or small groups because they need to collaborate with each other. Students must also use critical-thinking and problem-solving skills to design and create their invention and their communication skills to present their invention to others. There is agency within this project because students are creating their own learning experience. This helps to gain and maintain their interest in the project. Lastly, students must develop a solid understanding of how the invention would work and why the problem would be an important problem to solve. Technology is useful in developing these PEAK skills during this project during the beginning phase when students are asked to research their problem as well as for their presentation. Students can choose how they want to present their invention, and in years past, some have chosen to use their devices to create a presentation or other type of visual as their final product.

Other school projects that incorporate some aspects of PEAK that occur at our school include the third-grade famous American projects and the first-grade wax museum. These projects include students learning about an important person they are interested in, becoming an expert on that person, creating a visual and verbal presentation, and teaching others about their chosen person. Technology is crucial for these projects because students are given unlimited access to [appropriate] research sites. Each student can be engaged in their own learning by using their individual device to read articles and view videos to collect information about their chosen person. These projects would be harder to complete without access to 1:1 devices for each student.

**Breakout Rooms**

In my third-grade classroom, I, personally, have been helping my students develop some aspects of the PEAK principles by using breakout rooms. Breakout rooms are like the Escape Rooms that have become popular over the last couple of years. For this task, students are given a certain amount of time to “breakout” of the classroom by unlocking the mystery box located somewhere in our room. In order to get to the mystery box, they must accurately complete a series of mini tasks that lead them there. These could be content-based or simply just types of puzzles to solve. These tasks don’t necessarily incorporate all the PEAK principles, but the two that stand out most are the essential skills and the agency aspects. Students must be able to use teamwork, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving skills when working with their groups in order to be successful in unlocking the box. These tasks keep my students motivated and engaged and help to develop those skills, which are needed to prepare students for the world after education. In order for them to successfully “break out” they must have all the answers correct for each mini-task before moving to the final piece. This means that they must track their progress and continuously evaluate their answers, which helps to develop agency.

**Restorative Practices**

“Restorative practices involve changing relationships by engaging people: doing things WITH them, rather than TO them or FOR them-providing both high control and high support at the same time” (Mirsky, 2007). This has become a popular means of dealing with behavior problems within our school system over the last few years. Many schools have adopted the idea of using restorative practices in hopes of creating students who can problem-solve and deal with conflicts in a calm and appropriate way. Although this does not fully involve curriculum or content taught in the classroom, these practices support the essential skill sets needed in a constantly changing, innovative world. Within the idea of using restorative practices, Harford Hills has used a virtues project to teach our students about the virtues that create decent, well-rounded human beings. Students are positively rewarded for demonstrating virtues, such as kindness, perseverance, honesty, purposefulness, etc. which relates to character-building—one of the essential skills. We also encourage good citizenship within this project through programs where our students are giving back to the community. Some of these programs include our school food drive, the giving tree, which collects coats, hats, and gloves in the winter months, and the tab collection for the Ronald McDonald House.

**Conclusion**

In comparison to many of the schools Ted Dintersmith visited on his trip across the United States, Harford Hills still has a long way to go to be completely innovative. However, I am proud of the steps we are taking to try to instill the PEAK principles within our students.

References

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