

# **Consolidated Unified School District**



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## **Senate Education Committee Testimony on Innovation and Excellence in Kansas' schools**

**Personalized and Project Based Learning  
John Wyrick, Superintendent  
Erie USD 101**

**Tuesday, January 24, 2012**

In 2004, Erie High School began planning and transitioning to a Personalized Learning Model. The school district and community spent over two years researching instructional programs that would allow motivation of students, provide a caring adult, give real-world experiences and help students attain the 21st century skills they would need to be successful beyond high school. The project-learning model surfaced as one that would meet all of these requirements.

The program, however, is more than just projects and is personalized for each student in grades 9-12, who work with a team of their peers, and participate in their own learning. Parents and expert field mentors along with the student's advisor, work as true partners with the school to create a full, inviting, learning environment for the students. The PLP model utilizes a student-initiated project teaching method that engages students in learning 21st century skills of communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and creativity while at the same time building upon their base of knowledge.

PLP does not resemble a traditional classroom. Instead of formal, subject-orientated classes, individuals and groups of students choose, plan, research, and complete academic study and hands-on projects that result in tangible, real life products. Learning experiences take place outside of the confines of the school building (in the 'real-world') whenever possible, include community experts, and cover broad academic areas of study. The activities require students to develop skills in time management, teamwork, communication, planning, self-assessment, problem solving, and meaningful applications of acquired knowledge.

The most powerful component of this model is the advisory. Each highly qualified teacher now becomes a generalist and is responsible for the total education of no more than 20 students. The goal of the advisory is to create a strong learning environment that promotes student confidence, engagement, and academic achievement. Advisors meet daily with each student and guide the students through their projects, enlist the help of experts and highly qualified instructors, communicate with parents and establish a strong personal relationship with their students and thereby allows them to know what motivates their students and how to help them.

Curriculum is integrated, student-driven, project oriented and standards based. Students are assessed authentically through projects, products, and portfolios. This model not only allows smaller school districts to expand their curriculum but also allows for projects that can impact their communities. Furthermore, each student has their own personal workstation and work both individually at their station. Every station is complete with laptops and wireless Internet access and students have the option to work collaboratively in breakout rooms, specialty areas, media center, or in the field.

The Green Dream Team was created over three years ago and is one example of a project that greatly impacted the community and school. This project began with the school district patrons passing a bond issue for a new high school based on the Personalized Learning Model and certifying our building under the U.S. Green Building Councils (USGBC) guidelines for becoming LEED certified. The administration and individuals involved in the LEED certification had very little insight into the many facets involved in becoming certified under the LEED standards. Through this learning model, six students took the initiative and worked with our commissioning agent to fulfill the requirements. These students were responsible for ten of the forty-four LEED requirements needed for gold-level certification: a goal the students were eager to attain.

Students chose areas in which they were most interested and divided the tasks. The areas included Alternative Transportation, Water Efficient Landscaping, Innovation in Design, Thermal Comfort, Storage and Collection of Recyclables, Environmental Tobacco Smoke, and The School as a Teaching Tool to name a few. The students communicated and worked collaboratively with PBA architects in Wichita, Henderson Engineering in Kansas City, a landscaping architect, Crossland Construction Company, Southeast KS Conservation District, Earthly Ideas in Durango, CO., regional recycling companies, seed companies, and many more entities. In addition, one student wrote and received a waste-management grant to purchase recycling bins. The students continue today with six additional members to combat erosion, sustain the recycling program, monitor comfort quality, and develop lessons to teach environmental studies to all students in the school and community.

The Green Team is only one example of opportunities provided to our students under the Personalized Learning Model. Other student-initiated projects include the current development of a cattle facility on school grounds that will allow students to work with a

world-renown bovine geneticist to do genetic studies. The students in this case had to read certain laws governing this type of operation on school grounds, communicate with various entities, and petition the city for a dispensation of zoning regulations. Another student is building a lasagna garden in which the produce will be used for the school lunch program. Several have conducted water-quality studies in the Neosho River and surrounding area. Another student built a hydrogen converter for his truck, conducted fuel-efficiency tests and redesigned the converter until it gave him a profitable fuel savings. For several years the NASA Moon buggy competition allowed the students a competitive opportunity to design and build vehicles. Many long hours were spent on this endeavor and one year the students placed first in the world. As you can see, a project-oriented, personalized opportunity allows students to refine their basic knowledge skills in communication, math, science, and social science while delving more deeply into specific areas, thereby allowing the student to apply the knowledge and come away with a deeper understanding of how the world works and have the skills to succeed.

