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## A Homegrown Transformation at Winterboro School

04-28-2010

By Cathy Gassenheimer

It's been two weeks, and I am still energized by our A+ Board and Council meeting at Winterboro School in Talladega County.

I've blogged about Winterboro before. It is a rural school where an estimated 40% of students will be first-generation high school graduates. Unfortunately, until this year, many of the students were leaving school before they graduated. Last year, because of the drop-out rate, the school moved into the first year of school improvement.

Superintendent Suzanne Lacey and her very talented and committed staff decided to take action. They had been studying New Tech schools, and had visited several in California and Indiana, but the cost of becoming a New Tech school was high. Funding was limited, particularly in light of the current economic downturn. Suzanne and her staff decided to act anyway.

Over the summer, under the leadership of a new principal, they converted Winterboro, which houses grades 5 through 12, into a school rich with computers (1:1 student ratio in grades 7-12). Most importantly, Winterboro would become a school where teachers would work together to create interdisciplinary project-based learning experiences for their students.

When I visited Winterboro in January, I was so excited to see what was happening. While it was the same old beautiful building, what was happening inside was very, very different from my previous visits. Students were more engaged and teachers were working together and learning from each other.

I saw even more progress on my latest visit. When talking with students (and we were given ample opportunities to interact with a wide variety of students), they volunteered that they *wanted* to be at school. They talked about how much fun learning had become. They were quick to say that it was hard work, but they also said that it seemed easier because they were able to retain and apply what they were learning to real-life situations.

I was able to talk again with several of the students that I met in January. One, a junior, told me that her teachers and colleagues (that's what they call their fellow students) had helped her "come out of her shell." She said that serving in the role of a classroom manager, responsible for explaining to guests what they were learning, had helped her become more confident in her ability to communicate effectively with others. "Winterboro has literally changed my life," she told me.

Later in the day, we listened to a panel of teachers discuss the many changes taking place in the school. One teacher observed that she believed that they were able to transform Winterboro so quickly because THEY had to create the new project-based lessons from scratch. She wondered whether the faculty would be in the same place if they had been given a "trunk of lessons" from the New Tech

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schools. With the exception of one teacher on the panel, every other teacher agreed. Ownership and collaboration matter.

Sharing their hope that student test scores would improve this year, these highly engaged teachers observed that the change they saw in their students was worth all the hard work. As I left Winterboro I wondered what we could do to spur more transformations like this? What are your ideas? Are other schools and districts ready to build more project-driven learning into their classrooms?

*Cathy Gassenheimer is A+'s executive vice president for the Alabama Best Practices Center.*

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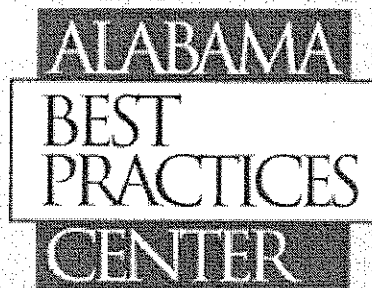
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**Winterboro High is Teaching Us about the Future**

02-09-2010

*(Editor's note: Here's another blog entry about Winterboro School.)*

By Cathy Gassenheimer

Many educators dream of a school environment where the curriculum is driven by projects and problem-based activities that challenge all students to learn more deeply and apply what they learn to the real world.

Some educators believe this kind of schooling simply isn't possible in today's high-stakes accountability environment. Winterboro School in rural Talladega County is out to prove them wrong.

Winterboro serves students in grades 5-12, about 85 percent of whom are on free or reduced lunch. As far as state testing benchmarks, the school has consistently met those, but it didn't take a fortune teller to see problems lying ahead. Fewer than 40% of the junior class of 2009 passed reading or math on the graduation exam. Because of its slumping graduation rate, Winterboro landed in the first level of state intervention for the 2009-10 school year. A depressing development, you might think. But Talladega district, school and teacher leaders took it in stride. They already had a powerful change process underway.

Talladega Superintendent Dr. Suzanne Lacey describes herself as a "home-grown product." She began her teaching career at Childersburg Middle School, moving to assistant principal and then principal at CMS. In 2008, after several years as deputy superintendent, Suzanne was selected by the Talladega County Board of Education to succeed Dr. Cindy Elsberry as the system's CEO.

During her years as deputy superintendent, Suzanne closely followed the progress of a group of Talladega educators engaged in our Microsoft-sponsored 21st Century Learners project, and she became convinced of the need to redesign schools to meet the demands of the 21st century workplace. Not long after becoming superintendent, Suzanne pulled together a leadership team to transform Winterboro High School around several key concepts, including:

- cross-disciplinary team teaching,
- project-based learning, and
- student evaluations focused on the skills most valued by employers: professionalism, work ethic, teamwork, collaboration, oral and written communication, critical thinking, and problem solving.

At Winterboro, new principal Craig Bates tapped Jennifer Barnett, a technology-savvy teacher leader at Talladega's Fayetteville High, to become the school's technology integration coach. She was an excellent choice. During our ABPC-Microsoft project, Jennifer served as the Talladega County team leader, and the team's excellent work earned them an invitation to Microsoft headquarters in Redmond, WA, where they met with other teachers from around the U.S. to explore the curriculum needs of students who will live and work in a digital age.

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The superintendent also contracted with the **Buck Institute for Education** to provide professional development on project-based learning for a newly-configured faculty which included many younger teachers. Using school construction funds, the district also added four "learning suites" to the Winterboro campus that facilitate interdisciplinary, technology-enhanced instruction, including a Moodle-based learning network.

**A few weeks ago** I had the opportunity to learn more about Winterboro's first-year progress when I joined about 100 educators (many from other school districts) for one of the school's 21st Century Showcase outreach events. Craig said before this school year, kids would not look adults in the eye. Dropout rates were unacceptably high, and it was clear that many students were not reaching their potential.

As I walked up the front steps, a student came outside to open the door for me. He looked me in the eye, shook my hand and said, "Welcome to our wonderful school!" Within a minute of my arrival four other students greeted me in similar ways.

As we entered the auditorium, we found students manning stations where they explained their cross-curricular projects articulately and in detail. One student showed a conical clown, developed in her geometry/art class. Lexxy told me that she not only understood how to determine the perimeter and area of a 3-D shape, but that she would never forget how to do it, as a result of her hands-on project experience.

Another student shared a scrapbook she made to demonstrate her knowledge of early 20th Century America. She built her portfolio around the stories of four fictional brothers – characters she created based upon her research into historical events such as the Industrial Revolution and the prohibition movement. The scrapbook contained letters "they" had written as well as mementos from the era. One brother had fought in the Spanish-American War. Another was a yellow journalist who wrote about the substandard conditions in meat plants in Chicago. Yet another was helping construct the Panama Canal. The final brother was "a drunk." She talked passionately and knowledgably about her project.

As we continued our Showcase tour, we also learned of students who are designing homes in math class. In another classroom, the Business Technology students are working on fundraising projects for their favorite charity (ranging from the March of Dimes to Haiti earthquake disaster relief) using sound business principles.

In a makeshift television studio housed in the school's original structure (built in the 1930s), I met a student who proudly demonstrated his sophisticated production equipment. He told me that a video he created to document the school's new learning concepts has earned him a part-time job at an area television station.

If you're a visual learner, take a look at [this report](#) on the Showcase event by FOX6-TV in Birmingham, which highlights the positive changes for one student and includes comments from Craig Bates and Suzanne Lacey.

"We needed to make some changes in how we were delivering instruction," Suzanne tells the Fox6 reporter. "Many of our former teachers had gotten complacent with instruction, and we really needed to look outside the box."

In my estimation, Talladega County is not only looking outside the box, they're moving outside the box and truly blazing a trail that others may follow.




*Learn more details about Talladega County's move toward project-based learning by [exploring this wiki](#), which presents a district-wide vision as well as a focus on Winterboro High School.*

Tags: **Secondary 21st Century skills Alabama Best Practices Center Success Stories**

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**Showing 2 comments**Sort by Popular now   **Subscribe by email**  **Subscribe by RSS****suzannefreeman** 4 days ago

I blogged about this too. See link to my blog.

<https://www.trussvillecityschools.com/Staff/Suz...>

Below is my what I put on my blog.

I visited Winterboro High School in Talladega County this week. They are in their first year of implementing Project Based Learning. As part of this approach, they use a lot of technology to complete their projects. Above is a picture of a poster that is displayed in every classroom. I really liked these questions. These questions put the focus on the quality of work students are doing.

Each teacher also has "C3B4Me" posted in every classroom. This means that the students must see three other students before coming to the teacher for assistance. I liked this too, especially in a project based learning environment.

What was amazing was how these students felt so empowered; they were so confident, just from being engaged in their school work. The students and teachers talked about how the school learning environment (culture) had changed. Most of these students are living in poverty and have struggled academically. Yet they talked about their aspirations and how the school culture had changed so dramatically in just 8 months. They said their memories of school last year were spit balls and paper balls being thrown. Whereas, this year they are focused on the future (going to college) and really enjoy their school work because it is meaningful. Many made references to how boring school was last year and talked about how much they enjoy school this year. Each of the students also talked about how their confidence and efficacy had grown. It was obvious because when they introduced themselves, they made eye contact and shook our hands with a firm grip. I felt as if I was in a place of business and these students see it this way too. Winterboro High School (teachers, students, and principal) has a great story to tell in a short amount of time (first year of implementation).

It was a great day of learning for me and I appreciated Dr. Suzanne Lacy, superintendent and Mr. Craig Bates, principal for hosting our visit. Representatives from the following groups were present: A+ Education Foundation Board and Council, Leadership Alabama, Alabama Superintendents' Leadership Network, School Superintendents of Alabama, State Department of Education officials. What a great day of celebrating learning!

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**cathygassenheimer** 3 days ago in reply to **suzannefreeman**

Thank you, Suzanne, for sharing your blog entry on Winterboro. I'm glad you mentioned the "C3B4Me" concept. What a great "real world" application. It may be one reason that so many students call each other colleagues!

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