

Innovation Tech brings project-based learning and 'Al-gym-bra' to Central New York students

By Laurie Cook

First period for high school freshman William "Billy" Moore is neither math nor physical education – it's both. It's "Al-gym-bra" class.

In that class, Moore and his classmates have learned about algebra by participating in softball games, keeping track of their statistics and then working through math problems using those statistics.

"I love learning like this," Moore said "Two hours go by fast because you're constantly doing something."

Moore attends Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES' Innovation Tech High School, which opened its doors in September 2014.

Located in Liverpool, it is part of the New Tech Network, a nonprofit organization that supports schools that use project-based learning and create innovative learning environments. Also a member of the New Tech Network is Tech Valley High, created by Capital Region BOCES and Questar III BOCES, and three schools in New York City.



Innovation Tech students work with teacher Leah LaChausse to prepare for their group presentation on the responsible use of technology. From left, LaChausse, Sam Breggard (North Syracuse school district), Alexis Rosa (Liverpool) and Chris O'Gorman (Liverpool) ❖ Photo courtesy of Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES

commitments are central: instruction that engages, culture that empowers and technology that enables.

A second New Tech High School is scheduled to open in the Cortland area in September 2016. Like Innovation Tech, it will involve partnerships with higher education, business and teacher preparation programs. Both New Tech schools also will serve as hubs for adult learning as educators come to learn about approaches used at these schools.

Innovation Tech students are evaluated by business partners as well as teachers, noted Colleen Viggiano, OCM BOCES' Assistant Superintendent for Student Services. "Students make presentations and get feedback from the business partners, which is invaluable," she said. "Real work, real problems and meaningful learning creates engaged learners,"

Participation in Innovation Tech is currently open to high school freshmen and sophomores from the OCM BOCES 23 component school districts. During the 2015-16 school year, juniors will be added and seniors will be eligible the following year.

These schools try to break away from the way most high school students were traditionally taught – sitting at desks with the teacher reciting information from the front of the room. Additionally, concepts are taught across subject areas.

According to NTN's 2014 Student Outcomes Report, the 22 New Tech schools with graduating classes in 2013, boast an average four-year graduation rate of 95 percent, a college enrollment rate of 73 percent and a college persistence rate of 83 percent. The last item refers to the percentage of students who persist in college beyond their freshmen year.

What accounts for these impressive statistics?

"New Tech schools are redefining secondary education," says OCM BOCES District Superintendent Jody Manning. "Students become self-directed learners who no longer depend on teachers and textbooks in a search of a single, right answer. They use technology on a regular basis, not just for special projects."

At Innovation Tech, students have opportunities to interact with businesses and community organizations on a regular basis. Students participate in projects designed

around issues faced by businesses.

Students work in teams to complete projects, which helps them develop critical thinking and communication skills and encourages a strong work ethic.

Each student receives a laptop computer to use for all assignments. Instead of turning in paper homework students email their work to their teachers.

"This model truly engages students through a technology-based approach to solving real world problems," said Karen Clark, director of alternative education for OCM BOCES. "I was just talking to one of our teachers who told me that they got an email from one of their students at seven o'clock the night before asking for assistance on uploading an assignment. The teacher was immediately able to guide the student through the process because teachers and students are always able to connect through technology."

Innovation Tech is part of the initiative led by OCM BOCES called "A Regional Vision: College, Career and Citizenship Readiness in Central New York." Three

Students can apply to Innovation Tech through their home school district

administrators or school counselors. After all applications are reviewed, potential students and their families will interview with Innovation Tech staff. Since enrollment is limited, a lottery system is employed when the number of candidates exceeds the available seats.

Moore says that going to Innovation Tech has been what he anticipated in most respects, but he feels that something unexpected has also happened as a result.

"Anyone that knew me at my old school would say that I was the quiet kid," he said. "But the students here brought me out of my shell. At my old school, I didn't say much because I was nervous in front of other people. But it isn't like that here. Everyone works together. They're nice and we support each other because we're working together."

For more information about Innovation Tech, visit innovatontech.us.

Laurie Cook is school information officer for Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES.



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