

Increasing Knowledge and Skills in this Digital, Global Era with Scott McLeod



Rethinking learning time in Clear Lake

Clear Lake Middle School knew where it wanted to go. It just needed to put some new structures in place to get there.

Teacher learning. Many organizations have ‘20 percent time’ initiatives, which give employees time and permission to learn and work on new topics of their choosing as long as they have potential benefit to the organization. CLMS took that idea and ran with it, substituting ‘teacher genius hour’ for some of its traditional professional development. Today teachers are investigating a variety of interest-based professional learning topics, including essential questions in the classroom, rethinking grading in math class, flipped classrooms, screencasting, and gamification. All of these filter back into educators’ classrooms and improve student learning experiences.

Student learning. Last year CLMS began implementing P3BL blocks, which emphasize passion, projects, and problems. Every day the 6th graders get a 42-minute block and the 7th and 8th graders get an 84-minute block. Sometimes teachers create the projects, sometimes students do. Example student projects include ‘upcycling’ and repurposing of old furniture, working with media and marketing companies to create an advertising campaign that sells Clear Lake to outsiders and airs on television stations and billboards, and a ‘Shark Tank’ initiative in which students pitch innovative product ideas that improve people’s lives and their community. Students also are involved in a number of projects with the local fire service, including an awareness campaign that teaches local citizens about fire and carbon monoxide safety, creating maps of rural water sources in the county that can be used to refill fire trucks, and mapping local business building layouts that then get uploaded to the fire department’s Active 911 app.

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Makerspace. This year CLMS also has implemented a makerspace called the Sandbox. Different challenges are set up for the students, who have 10 days to complete them. Hours are flexible, supervision is minimal (as are discipline issues). Students work on projects when they can, often logging time as early as 6:45am and as late as 5:30pm. Nearly a third of the school signed up for Round 3 of the challenges. The school’s Sandy Awards in May will honor the best designs of the year. And in early February the school’s Sandbox specialists (students, of course) will be hosting visually- and hearing-impaired peers to introduce them to some making/tinkering projects.

As teachers and students drive more of their own learning, the impacts on CLMS have been substantial. Energy and enthusiasm are high. Students who previously struggled with the traditional school model are finding their niches of expertise and success. A school that used to work for a few students now gives all of its students a chance to shine and have a voice.

How could you shake up your school day to create time for student (and staff) inquiry?

Upcoming events

- The nation’s largest EdCamp event is right here in Iowa! Please share with your educators and join us at one of our five EdCampIowa locations on February 13 for the most powerful professional learning you may ever experience. More info at edcampiowa.org.
- The annual Iowa 1:1 Institute will be in Des Moines on April 5 and 6. More info at iowalto1.com.

As always, stay in touch at dr.scott.mcleod@gmail.com, 707-722-7853, or [@mcleod](https://twitter.com/mcleod)!

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