

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



## Personalizing every student's level of success

The Van Meter Schools have long been an incubator for innovation. Van Meter was one of our earliest districts to implement a 1-to-1 student computing initiative and also was one of the first districts in Iowa to be named an Apple Distinguished School.

More recently, Van Meter has been diving deeply into project-based learning, standards-based grading, competency-based education, and flexible, modular schedules in which students can exercise some choice and determine how much time they need to spend on their various learning endeavors. Van Meter's work in the area of student competencies is especially impressive. Eventually, the district hopes to identify a comprehensive, interdisciplinary set of standards that all high school students need — plus an additional six to 10 competencies or dispositions — and these will become the district's graduation requirements. Students will be able to take multiple pathways to get there, including projects, traditional coursework, online classes, and anything else that feeds into the district's profile of a graduate. The hope is that most students will be able to complete these by junior year and then will be able to spend their senior year taking college classes, getting professional certifications, diving deeper into areas of interest and passion, and engaging in internships and service learning projects.

Teachers are in on the action too and rarely participate in whole-school learning contexts. Instead, classroom educators take a competency-based approach to their own professional learning and, through identification of the skills that they have and need, are able to personalize their professional growth. A badging system to track teachers' professional learning is in the works.

What I like about Van Meter is that, in the words of Superintendent Deron Durlinger, they "often have a willingness to take risks and try things that other districts wait for. If folks out there are doing cool stuff, we're not going to hold back on trying it out." This orientation toward risk-taking allows Van Meter to live at the cutting edge of leading educational innovation movements and to iterate quickly toward new opportunities. Initiatives that many other districts consider to be organizational stretches are thought of by Van Meter as just part of how it does business.



Van Meter also has framed its work appropriately. Instead of each initiative being a stand-alone, disconnected program within a traditional school setup, everything that Van Meter does is woven together and oriented toward the ultimate goal of personalizing student learning. For instance, when asked what they are most excited about, administrators will say that at the top of their list are the types of questions that teachers are asking about how to better help individual students and their educators' willingness to reexamine and alter current practices as needed.

The district is in the process of building a new school that will create different and varied kinds of learning spaces for students. I am sure that this new building will be amazing. But the district's long-term impacts on students will be a result of its ongoing willingness to reorient its instructional practices and its organizational support systems that facilitate more robust forms of learning and teaching.

Is your district leading for innovation?

### Upcoming events

- The annual Iowa 1:1 Institute will be in Des Moines on April 5 and 6. More info at [iowaltol.com](http://iowaltol.com).
- The Student Voices Matter Rally at the Iowa State Capitol is April 5 and is a student-driven statewide political rally in support of public education. Hope your students participate! More info at [iowasli.org](http://iowasli.org).
- EdCampIowa was awesome (again) this year. If it's not on your radar screen, it should be...

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

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