

In Hydetown, a new learning model is showing positive results

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Learning for the future

Photo: Sophia Sampson (left) and Mallory Cleland, both Level 5 learners, work together to create a solar oven. Sampson and Cleland worked to insulate the inside of their oven while creating a glass door for the front. Once the oven is complete, the girls said they hoped to be able to cook cinnamon rolls in it. This particular project was a part of the flex block in Hydetown Elementary School's mass customized learning model; and Sampson and Cleland both chose to build the ovens over a slew of other options that learners were presented with for the 12-day cycle.

HYDETOWN — Imagine a classroom setting where all students, despite age differences, are confident in themselves and excited to learn. Where students are not confined to categorization by class or academic achievement, but move at their own pace to improve upon skills that they need.

While this may sound far fetched, it's not that far off the mark of what Hydetown Elementary School's mass customized learning system appears to be achieving.

The school, which is the first at the elementary level in the state to completely immerse itself in the mass customized learning (MCL) model, has seen a world of difference in its students on multiple fronts, according to Principal Lisa Royek.

MCL, which places students in learning groups based on a plethora of facets — including ability, behavioral patterns, home lives, reading proficiency, and many more — focuses on tailoring a

student's learning experience to their individual needs, rather than by adhering to a set of standards for an entire grade level.

Because of this, students are not always grouped by age, but instead by what skill level, or area of learning, that they need help with.

In addition to changes in grouping, the school has implemented a change in terminology to more accurately fit the way things are being done. Instead of students, there are learners; and instead of teachers, there are learning facilitators.

Facilitators no longer give out letter grades; instead, learners go through 12-day cycles where they focus on a particular skill, like geometry or fractions, at a particular level that is on par with where they are individually.

The facilitators work with the learners to help them master these skills to the best of their ability within the 12 days before reevaluating the learners and then regrouping them.

These lessons are broken up into four, 90-minute blocks, with two being used for math and language arts, and two being used for lunch, recess, social studies, science, and specials, like art, music, and physical education.

While some learners have mastered a particular skill by the end of 12 days and are ready to move to the next, others need more time.

For example, some learners may be in second grade, age-wise; but, in terms of skill in the area of reading, they are grouped with other learners who are reading at a sixth-grade level. Additionally, some learners may need more time mastering a skill than others, which puts them in a group with younger learners.

Fortunately, because the learners in the groups are moving at the same pace, it allows for learners who may have previously felt defeated or frustrated in comparison with their classmates to feel more confident, and in turn, encourage them to ask questions and become more engaged in their learning.

Royek said through MCL, learners have been able to point out their own strengths and weaknesses, and can therefore determine what areas they need help with.

This is enabling learners to take control of their own education, propelling them to succeed and push themselves. Additionally, learners are given choices during their flex blocks, allowing them to choose a topic that interests them, like space, archaeology, or the revolutionary war, while still learning about a topic that meets the criteria for PA CORE standards.

All of these facets, Royek said, have lead to a noticeable increase in learner morale and effort, a decrease in disciplinary and behavioral issues, increased learner engagement, and learners becoming more willing to ask questions and problem solve together.

While this has proved to be at times challenging for the facilitators, the fruits of their labor have made all the work worth it, according to Royek.

While MCL is still fairly new to the school, after nearly a year of using this model, Royek feels confident that facilitators can explain how it works to any parents who may have questions, as well as other districts looking to implement the same model.

The goal, according to Royek, is to allow parents to be involved and give their input on the MCL model.

“Our goal is to be even more involved,” she said. “We’re going to have parent tours in the fall, so the parents can actually walk around and see, in action, the way their kids are learning. And in many ways, it’s not different. You still have teachers teaching and children learning; but, in many ways, it is different based on the level of engagement and that [the learners] are on their own path based on what they need, not on how old they are.”

The staff at Hydetown Elementary was in agreement during a Herald visit on Tuesday that the traditional learning model that had been used for so many years was outdated, especially in a society that has become so advanced in terms of technology.

Instead of keeping things the same and being afraid of change, the facilitators at Hydetown are embracing it and have utilized technology as a helpful learning tool, allowing students to put together projects and find class lessons created by the facilitators on Google Documents.

Royek said a common misconception is that facilitators are giving learners a laptop or a tablet and allowing them to do all of their learning on the device rather than teaching.

This is not the case.

The laptops and tablets are more so a tool for research and to aid in both the learning process and evaluation of the learners’ progress.

All of the implemented changes brought on by the MCL model, according to facilitators Jen Sampson and Beth Butryn, have brought about noticeable changes.

“During the 90-minute blocks, they are pretty much engaged the whole 90 minutes,” Butryn said. “You don’t have that kid staring out the window anymore. You don’t have that kid fidgeting with something in a desk. I mean, they’re all involved in the lesson.”

The increased level of interest in participating and the confidence of learners who are no longer burdened by the sense of failure that stems from low grades, according to Butryn, has been unimaginable.

“They take ownership over their learning,” Butryn said. “They want to learn, and sometimes they will go above and beyond what you want them to do because something has piqued their interest and they want to be successful. And we stress that. We tell them, ‘this is your learning.’”

The learners, according to Royek, are coming to understand that making mistakes is okay, because it helps to show the facilitators what areas they are struggling in, and it shows the learners that they can improve.

Instead of being discouraged by mistakes, learners are starting to view them as a challenge to be overcome, Royek said.

This encouragement from facilitators has, in turn, made learners feel more comfortable asking questions and seeking help when they need it, rather than feeling afraid that they will look dumb in front of their peers.

These learners not only seek help from their facilitators, but also their peers, who are more than willing to aid each other in problem solving.

While there are still a few bugs to work out, such as how learners will handle moving from the MCL model at the elementary school to the middle school, where MCL has not yet been implemented, Royek is confident that this particular system may soon become districtwide. This will enable learners to not only master skills at their own pace, but potentially discover what particular skills interest them enough to perhaps become a future career choice.

For now, however, Royek said this is just the vision. This vision, much like the apparent improvements brought on by the MCL model now being used at Hydetown Elementary, is not unattainable.

Royek stressed that had it not been for the willingness of the staff to work together and the contributions of both staff and parents, the model would likely not have been as successful as it has been so far.

While it may have been a lot of work, Royek said the progress made by the learners has given that work meaning and value while simultaneously empowering the learners, and with the same levels of cooperation on a grander scale, the results are possible districtwide.

In fact, the success of the elementary school's MCL model has attracted the attention of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, which will be sending representatives to Hydetown to witness the model in action, on May 17.

In addition to the state and the staff of Hydetown Elementary noticing the positive change in their learners, the learners themselves have also been vocal about their approval of MCL.

Hanging in the hallways of the elementary school are several mission statements of sorts, written by the students themselves, that express how the MCL model has allowed for students to eliminate the "lid" over their learning capabilities, and how multi-age groups based on individual learning needs have allowed the learners to avoid sitting through lessons that were not challenging them enough.

This apparent success, for both the facilitators and the learners, is only the beginning.