

The Concept of Relevance

By Naperville School District 203 Superintendent Mark Mitrovich

The new four “R”s of education are rigor, relevance, responsibility and resiliency. In a previous article, I wrote about the first “R” – academic rigor. By all measures, the students of District 203 are excelling in a rigorous academic curriculum. Our challenge is to continually update and improve our curriculum, which is the focused work of our teachers and curriculum specialists.

However, as this curriculum is developed, there is a rapidly increasing emphasis on making that curriculum relevant to the world our students will be entering as they leave District 203.

Whatever post-secondary course they choose to pursue, their ability to apply what they have learned during their first twelve years of formal education will be continually assessed. A closer look at many of the programs within the District demonstrates this priority on relevance at all grade levels.

Earlier this year, Naperville North High School was the recipient of a major technology grant from Hewlett Packard focused on the areas of science, mathematics, engineering, and technology. Student projects include: determining water quality with NALCO; expanding the applications of biofuels with Packer Engineering; an environmental preservation effort with the DuPage Forest Preservation District on the Springbrook Prairie; a satellite interceptor project with engineers from Lockheed Martin, and the applications of food chemistry with FONA International. These are only a few of the many projects underway, thanks to this \$265,000 grant and the passionate commitment of these business-education partners.

Similar programs are underway at Naperville Central High School throughout the various curricular areas. One program of particular interest is the Wall Street Society, part of the National Association of Investment Clubs. Students in this program are actively involved in learning the intricacies of investing in the stock market. They actively research various companies within major market sectors. They must put together a formal presentation and

report back to the other students, their faculty advisor, and an investment counselor who serves as an advising partner to the students. This program takes on an added element of relevancy in that the students are free to invest their own money. Given the recent trials in the financial industry, these students are experiencing relevance in a very tangible manner.

These projects and many, many more not only serve as “real” world examples for our students, but also emphasize other key skills that are critical in advancing the overall mission of the District. First of all, developing partnerships with community agencies, local businesses, and volunteers is critical to the implementation of these programs. District 203’s Business Partnership program has been a strong proponent of these endeavors. Our teaching staff has been actively involved in not only emphasizing relevance in class lessons, but seeking out opportunities to bring people and organizations into the classroom, as well as extending authentic learning outside the classroom.

Learning to work as part of a team, whether that is in school, the worksite, or the community at large, is a tremendously valuable skill for our students. Working cooperatively in a team to accomplish a goal transfers from school into many of the roles our students will fill in the future.

Finally, we know that the better our students become at connecting rigor and relevance, the deeper the learning, the greater the retention, and the overall sense of accomplishment for them.