

## Education in the Next Decade: Are We Prepared?

A couple of weeks ago I attended the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) conference to gather information related to how we, as a district, can better serve our students through blended (combining face to face instruction with online content) and online learning. One of my greatest takeaways came from a presentation by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The focus of the presentation was a futuristic view of where education is going in the next decade. As you might imagine it was heavily focused on the impact which technology will have on the educational landscape. The presenter, Stacy Childress, a Harvard MBA and Deputy Director of Education for Gates, identified three key innovations to look for in schools over the next decade. In the paragraphs which follow I will discuss each of these concepts and where the Wickenburg Unified School District sits regarding its preparedness to adapt to these changes.

The first innovation discussed was the concept of personalized learning for students. In essence Ms. Childress was indicating that in the next decade there will be an increasing move toward using technology to meet students at their current academic level, based upon their individual learning needs. We will use technology which focuses on the student's learning style, their aptitudes, desired learning pace and academic ability level. In other words, we will increasingly differentiate student learning based upon their individual needs and desires. So, where is WUSD at currently with this concept? Well, both our blended and online learning programs at Vulture Peak and through the Wickenburg Digital Learning Program (grades 9-12) allow for this type of learning. We are seeing increasing interest in this type of format and I believe desire will continue to grow as time progresses. Our experiences with the Vulture Peak blended learning program are leading us to consider how these concepts can be more broadly integrated into the regular school setting. We are exploring the possibilities currently and are attempting to learn from others across the country who have successfully navigated these waters previously.

A second concept described focused on "competency-based" learning. Whether in the traditional or online classroom this model is sure to gain wide-based acceptance as school districts increase student learning standards to compete in a global economy. Competency-based learning is not new, but has gained renewed interest as schools work to effectively prepare students for college and career. The concept, at its core, focuses on moving away from a "seat time" system where if a student spends four years in high school and passes all of their classes they earn a diploma to a system where students must show content mastery. Once again, you are likely asking where Wickenburg is at regarding this concept. In answering this question I am happy to report that our new Move On When Ready program at Wickenburg High School is a competency-based system. Students have the opportunity to take "end of course" ACT exams, which if passed during their first two years of high school earns them a "Grand Canyon Diploma" (GCD). The GCD is an indicator that the student is college and career ready. Students who achieve this status are deemed ready to enter community or technical college without need for remedial course work. As an incentive, if a student completes the

requirements for the GCD the Wickenburg Unified School District will pay their community college tuition, assuming they desire to pursue a post-secondary education at the end of their sophomore year.

The third and final innovation is very new and is really an emerging field at this stage. It is the concept of adaptive learning systems. What is an adaptive learning system you ask? Well, I must say it is amazing. It is a system which uses algorithms to “adapt” to the students learning style and then modifies how it delivers information to the student. In practical terms, it learns how the student learns and then modifies the instructional delivery to match their individualized, personal needs. At this stage WUSD is one of 6 or 7 school districts in the U.S. which is piloting this innovation. It is too early to tell how the program will work for school-aged students, but clearly it is an innovation which will gain additional prominence in our schools as time progresses.

As you can see K-12 education will change in dramatic ways over the next decade. The learning process will be targeted toward individual student needs and desires, expectations for students will increase dramatically, and we will move toward student competency and away from seat time. I believe each of these concepts will make for a better education system and I am happy to report that WUSD is seen as a front runner with these innovations on both the state and national level.