Real Projects, Real Learning at Texas High School

By Wendy McMahon

Some days when Jill Galloway, Technology Coordinator, walks the hallways of **New Tech High @ Coppell (NTH@C)** in Coppell, Texas, she feels like she's stepped into the offices of a multinational corporation rather than a high school.

Students pass by carrying laptops, often wearing business attire, discussing upcoming deadlines, project details and presentation dates. There are no bells, and students are given real-world projects to work on, such as developing every aspect, from pricing to design, of a plan to build a new addition to the campus of Coppell Independent School District (ISD).

"Everything is authentic and relevant," explains Galloway. "Students don't have to ask, 'Why are we going to learn this?' because the projects that are posed to them are posed in a real-world setting. Every problem that they are faced with is true to life."

Two years ago, Coppell ISD administrators decided to create a new high school based on the **New Tech Network** learning model, which focuses on project-based learning in a 1:1 computing environment. The result was New Tech High @ Coppell, a student-driven environment where learners tackle projects with the support of technology, and teachers act as facilitators.

"Our goal is to equip these kids with 21st-century skills so they will be successful in a global society," explains Galloway. "We want to prepare these kids not only with content knowledge but with skills that are needed in today's workforce such as collaboration, research skills and being organized."

Technology that supports learning goals

To support this goal, Galloway knew the school needed to have the right technology in place. Along with providing laptops for every student, the district turned to SMART products such as the **SMART Board™ interactive whiteboard**.

"We wanted our kids to be engaged. We've used SMART products in other campuses in our district, and when we use SMART Boards the level of engagement is through the roof," says Galloway. "We wanted to incorporate the use of those tools in our campus here, so every single classroom has a SMART Board and mounted projector."

Every laptop also has **SMART Notebook™ collaborative learning software**, which provides students with access to powerful software for creating the presentations they deliver as part of almost every project they are assigned.

"The Notebook software they use to develop their presentations makes them more interactive. It allows students to do something other than just presenting information to an audience. They can get their audience involved," explains Galloway.

"Students don't have to ask, 'Why are we going to learn this?' because the projects that are posed to them are posed in a real-world setting."

Jill Galloway
Technology Coordinator
New Tech High @ Coppell
Coppell, Texas

Empowering students

When asked if the SMART Board interactive whiteboard and SMART Notebook software support the NTH@C 1:1 learning model, Spanish teacher Derryl Lee's response is quick and enthusiastic.

"Absolutely. This is a project-based learning environment, and in every project that I create – which is about nine per year – there is some piece of technology. And in probably eight out of the nine projects that the learners have to present, they use the SMART products. They typically will use the SMART Board and SMART Notebook anytime that they can."

For example, to immerse students in Spanish vocabulary, Lee charged them with developing a digital tourism magazine or website for a hotel in Mexico that had decided to go green and stop using printed marketing materials. The results were impressive. Students used SMART Notebook to develop their final product, including images, links and articles they wrote in Spanish about the hotel. "They were really very creative," says Lee.

Making 1:1 manageable

Along with SMART Board interactive whiteboards and SMART Notebook collaborative learning software, Galloway says educators have also used **SMART Sync™ classroom management software** to support their 1:1 learning environment.

"SMART Sync is definitely a big help in a 1:1 environment when every student has a laptop," explains Galloway. "It's great to be able to monitor the kids, gather responses and transfer files. We do a lot of work digitally, so having access to that file transfer functionality is a great alternative to e-mail."

Galloway says teachers loved the version of the software for the Windows® operating system. Now that the school has become a mixed PC and Mac environment, it is participating in the beta testing program for the Mac version of SMART Sync. Galloway expects that when the full Mac version is released this coming fall, the product will become their district standard for classroom management software.

Following the path to success

While New Tech High is only in its second year of operation, Galloway and Lee feel the results of the school's learning program are already showing.

"The kids love coming to school every day. We have one of the highest attendance rates for a high school in the state, and that says a lot right there," says Galloway. "Students praise each other, arrange meetings outside of class time…. They're learning skills that I certainly never learned when I was in school. And I think that's going to help them be successful." **EC**