

## **Schools look to grow tomorrow's entrepreneurs**

### **Innovation**

#### **New programs focused on innovation, collaboration**

**By Lauren Anderson**

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WAUKESHA — Innovation. Collaboration. Communication. Problem solving. Outside-the-box thinking.

More than just buzzwords, these are among the qualities that educators are looking to develop in their students as they prepare them for the future job market.

In Waukesha County, school districts are making concerted efforts toward that end, launching new programs and courses aimed at fostering entrepreneurialism in students and providing them the skills they will need in the “real world.”

### **Pewaukee Insight**

For Pewaukee High School, educators saw the need for a new approach during the district's regular curriculum renewal process several years ago.

“We saw a lot of research indicating most students who engage with community members and build those relationships, have authentic and real-world experiences, that they will need in the future — student engagement goes up,” said Danielle Bosanec, assistant director of curriculum and instruction for the Pewaukee School District. “We knew we needed to do a better job of tapping into our community and helping our kids, and putting a value on building that innovative and entrepreneurial spirit.”

And so, in 2015, Insight was born — a capstone program that allows students to complete real-world projects in a corporate office while working with area business representatives. The program began by offering just a global business track, but has since expanded to include Business Innovation, Engineering Innovation and Pathways to Teaching.

The goal? To give students “21st-century skills,” or what Insight officials call “success skills” — the things employers want to see in their employees, like work ethic, collaboration and having a growth mindset, Bosanec said.

As students in the program are tasked with tackling real-world business problems, they work in collaboration with business mentors. It's one of the program's best features, Bosanec said.

“Students would say it's the most important part of Insight,” Bosanec said. “Because it has allowed them to be in relationship with an adult who is not a teacher or parent. And the advice mentors give is totally invaluable.

“It is the piece of Insight that students most enjoy and the reason most of our students apply.” Insight has seen success in its first two years, with growing participation rates from year one to two, and students leaving with more direction for their future, and even some securing internships with area firms, Bosanec said.

It's also enjoyed recognition from state education officials, with State Superintendent Tony Evers visiting and saying he would like to see the concept replicated in more schools.

### **New Berlin's iAID course**

As the New Berlin School District has made a push in recent years to offer students more real-world exposure to and preparation for careers through partnerships with businesses, Strategic Advisor to the Superintendent Laura Schmidt said officials discovered a gap in the district's offerings. "We looked at what happens in the Project Lead the Way Engineering and Design classroom," she said. "And there's a lot of systems thinking, there's a lot of challenging conditions developed, but it's limited to those who take that course. And as we were thinking about that, we realized all kids need this. They all need the opportunity to look at things differently. In real life, you need to be ready to make some pretty complicated decisions."

Seeing the need for students from all disciplines to have exposure to that kind of coursework, the district is now partnering with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Center for Entrepreneurship and the Innovation in Milwaukee Commons Program to offer a new Advanced Innovation and Design course — iAID.

The course, which launched this semester, is based off of Stanford Lean LaunchPad methodology. That approach, in short, encourages people to propose a business opportunity in the form of a hypothesis about a need in the market, testing assumptions about the market and customer needs, and adjusting the product or service based on feedback.

Students will be challenged with "real world" problems — ones that are open-ended and ambiguous with a lot of variables, Schmidt said.

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Pewaukee Insight students Gwennette Ross, Ryan Wagner, Tommy Manbeck and Kyle Turba work with Arvind Gopalratnam, director of social responsibility for the Milwaukee Bucks, during an assignment in which they needed to recommend an inventory tracking system to the organization.

Submitted photo

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An example of such a problem is the challenge: "Create a 'smart neighborhood' product, system or strategy designed to conserve utility usage and increase civic accountability amongst a community of residents."

There are no tests and failure is acceptable, as long as students apply what they learned to the next iteration of solution development, district officials said. Students will work with mentors, who will advise and support them throughout the process.

Both Pewaukee Insight and the New Berlin School District are working with The Commons, a Milwaukee-based collaborative program of southeast Wisconsin colleges and universities, local businesses and entrepreneurs that blends startup ventures with corporate innovation and includes mentoring professionals.

Schmidt said, by connecting students with area businesses and mentors, programs such as those can also help encourage students to stay in southeastern Wisconsin after graduation.

“Our area has a lot of innovation and a lot of great ability, but kids don’t know about it,” Schmidt said. “And if kids aren’t exposed to opportunities that allow them to think differently about education, how will they know to look for that in their next step? It’s all about the pipelines and giving them the skills they need.”

### **Elmbrook’s Launch**

Slated to launch in the fall, the Elmbrook School District’s new Launch program is designed to give upperclassmen an exploration of a career path of their choosing with real-world challenges.

The Launch concept emerged out of conversations with area businesses and higher education partners in recent years regarding the need to attract, retain and train the region’s future workforce.

The program is designed to give students professionbased learning by working on projects with community partners, developing their professional skills and helping them develop an entrepreneurial mindset.

Students from Brookfield Central and East high schools will be able to pursue one of three strands — global business, business analytics or future teachers.

Executive Director Robert Hall said buy-in from community partners, students and parents has been high.

“There are enthusiastic business owners who want to attract regional talent,” he said. “There are parents who really see the value in giving students a real-world project or idea or need for a company to pursue. Kids are excited about it.”

Hall said the program should be mutually beneficial for both those in the specific industries, as well as students.

“These industries have such a need to attract talent and I think the forwardthinking companies are really excited to have fresh ideas and fresh minds on needs and ideas that companies have,” she said.

Hall also recognizes that employees are increasingly mobile. Few stay in the same career for a lifetime.

“How many people enter a career field they’re no longer in?” Hall said. “But if you can teach kids to identify a problem, how to strategize ways to solve that problem in teams, ways to sell that solution — I think the type of problem is irrelevant at times. If we can really teach that problem-solving process, then I think we’re really making a change.”

Hall said officials are still developing a plan for the Launch space, though he said it will be designed to look like a professional work space.

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