

QTEA Innovation Award Application - 2016

Application # 15

School Name: VVMS

School Org Number: 868

Principal Name: Joe Truss

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Describe the equity challenge or opportunity you would like to tackle in a different way.

VVMS is a school predominately comprised of students of color, students living in poverty, and students exposed to continuous trauma. Consequently, our students are experiencing both an achievement and opportunity gap. Based on the 2016 SBAC, our students are scoring 11% proficient/advanced on Math and 16% proficient/advanced on English Language Arts, which is in line with our Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) data that shows only 22% of our students are reading a grade level or above. With this lack of proficiency, students are not on track to succeed in High School and are at increased risk of not graduating from High School. We believe in breaking these patterns of systemic oppression, however in order to do so, deeper learning must occur.

Students in middle schools often struggle to contain their energy, which can lead to disruptions and misbehaviors. We have seen a high number of office referrals, nearly 1000 during the 2015-2016 school year. When spending time in classrooms, we observe far too many students sitting for long periods of time and doing individual work. We also see students penalized for moving around the classroom, and unhappy that their classes are not engaging enough. I have personally heard students say, "I am bored," "this is not interesting," or "all we do is sit down and be quiet." This antiquated pedagogy is more aligned with a factory model of schooling, one based on compliance, and one of directional learning. As a result, we are moving towards a more robust, interactive, and collaborative classroom.

Our essential question is: What types of learning spaces lend themselves towards 21st century learning and culturally responsive teaching?

What outcome(s) or change(s) would you like your design to achieve at your school site?

In order to interrupt systemic oppression, patterns must be broken and new habits must be formed. Students need to be moved to the center of their learning, the classroom must be reconfigured, and teaching strategies must be changed. Professor John Ratey, in a 2008 Harvard Medical study noted that physical exercise, “puts the brain of the learners in the optimal position for them to learn.” It is imperative that students be given the time and space to converse, debate, and create. Through my work with the Envision Schools in the Bay Area, I have been exposed to Project Based Learning, flipped classrooms, and performance assessment. These philosophies prepare students with 21st Leadership Skills, as well as the habits they will need for success in higher education.

In addition, students must be able to make connections, move around the room, and learn from each other. Through culturally responsive teaching, students are prepared to become independent learners, build their intellectual capacity, and address our achievement gap (Hammond, 2014). At our school, this would manifest in higher grades, increased participation, and higher achievement on the SBAC and SRI. There are a few teachers who have already begun the process of including a more culturally responsive teaching framework in their classes, as well as more kinesthetic learning activities. One 8th grade History teacher noted that students were more engaged and more connected, in response to using these new techniques. This same teacher had the opportunity to get new flexible furniture and his students describe his class as their favorite. As I have spent time in his class, I have noticed a high level of collaboration and focus in his students.

How is this challenge or opportunity an equity dilemma, one that affects with your school’s ability to ensure that all of your students will thrive?

We have kept students in rows and individual desks, all facing the teacher for too long. This practice, along with others, are especially preventing our African American students from having success. In looking at SBAC data, our African American students have a Math proficiency of 2% and an ELA proficiency of 8%. In addition, our Samoan students have a Math proficiency of 0% and an ELA proficiency of 4%. These numbers are egregiously low, and we want to focus on our better meeting the needs of our African American and Samoan students. One part of this requires curricular changes and the portion we are focusing on is our teacher’s instructional moves. We believe that by changing the physical layout of the classroom and by adding more flexible furniture, our focal students will thrive. It has been documented that both African American and Pacific Islander students exhibit many features of cultural collectivism, including group dynamics, collaboration, relationships, and collective wisdom (Hofstede, 2010). Due to our students roots, a teacher can harness the power of students culture in accelerating

their learning.

With respect to our college and career goals for students, we must work harder to prepare students for the workplace. These 21st century learning skills require one to be skilled at presentations, project management, and collaboration. In the Bay Area, we must prepare our students to be able to compete in STEM fields, a field that is not very diverse. African-American and Latino workers now represent 29 percent of the general workforce population, but only 16 percent of the advanced manufacturing workforce, 15 percent of the computing workforce and 12 percent of the engineering workforce. We would like to level the playing field for our students, and that starts with the classroom.

Furthermore, most companies and offices now look similar to cafés, art rooms, and workshops, instead of the factories and cubicles. Therefore our classrooms and schools must prepare our students for success. The equity dilemma here is that suburban, private, and more affluent schools have been responding to this for a least a decade. Conversely, underserved schools like VVMS are left behind. We believe our students are just as deserving of a learning environment that facilitates creativity and provides a high quality education. Our challenge will address the inequity in classroom configurations, student-teacher dynamics and our achievement gap. Vision 2025 calls for personalized pathways, which are more possible when we move from a "sage on the stage" model to something that is more in line with the "guide on the side" model. Also, Vision 2025 calls for reimagining our space and time to promote learning, ultimately preparing students to meet the graduate profile.

What solutions have you tried or considered to address this challenge or seize this opportunity so far?

We have experimented with some alternative classroom configurations in Math classes, which have pioneered group work and Complex Instruction. Much of this work calls for working in groups at tables and discussing their learning with each other. As a result, students are more engaged and active in these classes. Students are understanding their content on a deeper level, with the addition of manipulatives, and a focus on the center of the table, rather than the board at the front of the room. Although students are not performing very well on the SBAC, their understanding of content and interest has increased greatly.

Our librarian has also purchased modern mobile furniture. In this space we have seen students collaborate and thrive while engaging in Maker projects, computer coding and other cooperative activities

In other rooms, teachers use students configured in circles to promote community building and a sense of belonging. Some classes are regularly “circling up” to connect, to address an issue, or provide space for healing. These are known as Restorative Practices and a part of the Safe and Supportive Schools Resolution in SFUSD. However, circles are especially difficult with our more traditional single person desks. This has shown promise in improving the climate of the classroom and facilitating learning.

What we have learned, is that teaching is dynamic and calls for flexibility. One moment a teacher wants to demonstrate an experiment, and another moment teachers want students to tackle a problem in groups. Moreover, the next moment the teacher may want to form a circle of chairs to lead a round of celebrations. A great deal of time is lost in reconfiguring classrooms, and moving furniture that was never intended to move or serve an alternative function.

Lastly, our school is in the final phase of a remodel. The new hallways and classrooms are beautiful. This year students and families entered our school and were amazed and impressed with the changes. In just these first few weeks of school we have seen a noticeable positive change in the climate of our hallways and classrooms based and feel this is a direct result of the upgrade to the building. Unfortunately, we have had to refurnish our classrooms with the same old and damaged furniture.

How have you engaged your school to identify your challenge/opportunity for this process?

The challenge was vetted in our Instructional Leadership Team as well as our Climate Leadership Team. In addition, we have had conversations at faculty meetings and at our Student Council meetings about classroom furniture and learning spaces. These teams, as well as our UBC, will be able to support the design process and provide feedback. Each teacher and group of students may have different perspectives, which will create a more robust design.

Who is on your design team? (the more diverse the better)

Administrator - Joe Truss

Teachers - Lorraine Cathey and Jay Cunningham

Paraprofessional - Sean Nunely

Students - Nia Stith, José Tirado

How will you make sure your team will commit the time and effort needed to succeed?

I have shared the dates with participants and I plan on presenting updates to our Faculty along the way. All participants are aware of the dates of the evening sessions, as well as they have had opportunity to provide input on the grant. Teachers will be able to bring back updates to their grade level teams, and students will do the same at our Student Council. This will create more buy in, gather more input, and hold the group accountable. Additionally, I have announced to the staff that VVMS is applying for an Innovation Award, to build interest.

Which Innovation bootcamp did your school participate in?

August 22, 2016, 4:30pm-7:30pm