

East Irondequoit shows 'classrooms of the future' during NSBA site visit



East Irondequoit second-graders wearing "STAFF" t-shirts act as tour guides during a technology site visit organized by the National School Board Association. One student served as navigator, a second as reader and a third as timer. Photo by Eric Randall

By Eric D. Randall
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

They came for the technology. And they stayed for the furniture.

In an instructional technology site visit organized by the National School Boards Association in November, 96 visitors from across the state and nation spent two days in the East Irondequoit Central School District. When the tours were over, some participants couldn't stop talking about the variety of chairs – J-shaped scoops, cylindrical stools, oval ottomans, bean-bag chairs and movable foam benches.

"It's just like the business world, where we're seeing comfy chairs and flexible seating," explained Nicole Charles, a fifth-grade teacher in the Rochester-area district.

"Kids can't collaborate with each other when they are sitting in rows and desks," said Superintendent Susan Allen.

In East Irondequoit, classrooms are busy – and often noisy. Instead of everyone listening to the teacher at the front of the room, individuals and groups are doing their own things. Students are interacting, both electronically and face-to-face, as they react to each other's work.

Yes, there can be issues with control of the classroom. But East Irondequoit teachers told visitors that they just establish ground rules and expect students to follow them. When intermediate school teacher Jason DeJohn wants eyes on him, he says, "iPads flat on the desk."

"The advantages have outweighed

the craziness they brought," said another teacher, Katie Van Eps.

With support from the University of Rochester (see *On Board*, June 12, 2017), East Irondequoit has become a champion of the idea that classroom technology can be used to tap into teachers' creativity.

The NSBA site visit lent legitimacy to the 3,200-student district's efforts to chart a path toward a style of teaching that district leaders and University of Rochester professors think all school districts will embrace, eventually. They call it "digitally rich teaching."

The pedagogical concept is that once you put an internet-connected device in the hands of every student (called a 1:1 learning program), teachers will find new ways to teach that require students to use those devices in self-directed ways.

In a keynote address, Michael Fullan, the former dean of education at the University of Toronto, said the new paradigm is the teacher is a "lead learner" who is guiding students on independent paths of internet-aided discovery.

All participants received a copy of a 99-page book co-authored by Fullan called *The Power of Unstoppable Momentum: Key Drivers to Revolutionize Your District*. In its conclusion, the book states: "We know one thing for sure – you cannot buy your way into the future by adding technology ... Pedagogy and culture drive change, and technology accelerates it – if you get the sequence right."

The big lift is changing school culture, according to another speaker, Stephen Mauney, superintendent of the Mooresville Grade School District



A "classroom of the future" in the East Irondequoit school district includes a touch screen and flexible seating. The ottoman-like chairs are "Puddle stools" by TMC furniture and cost about \$500 each. Photo by Eric Randall

in North Carolina, which claims it's implementation of a 1:1 learning program has led to boosting its high school graduation rate from 77 percent to 97 percent over 10 years.

"If it's all top-down, the culture won't change," Mauney said.

East Irondequoit's strategy has been to invite teachers to apply to take part in technological pilots, according to Joseph Sutorius, the district's chief information officer. This has yielded a corps of teachers who are eager to try new things, then teach others, he said.

To get buy-in from everyone, including school board members, district officials have emphasized what

Superintendent Allen calls the "social equity standpoint." A former state Superintendent of the Year, she sees technology-enhanced teaching and learning as the best strategy to bridge the achievement gap between the economic haves and have-nots.

In a closing break-out session, district leaders were asked how confident they are that the initiatives on display during the site visit will result in higher student achievement after, say, 10 years.

"Our trajectory is sky high, in my opinion," said Mary Grow, assistant superintendent for instruction. "I'm convinced in 10 years we'll be a school to watch, no doubt."



Raffaella Borasi, dean of the Warner School of Education at the University of Rochester, speaks to participants at an NSBA site visit about the university's efforts to prepare teachers for "digitally rich" teaching. Photo courtesy of the East Irondequoit Central School District

Costs add up when outfitting a 'classroom of the future'

To find out what's possible with new technology and furniture in creating a new educational dynamic, the East Irondequoit Central School District invited teachers to apply for district grants to create their vision of a "classroom of the future."

So far, the district has created 10 "classrooms of the future" and modernized one library.

For technology, costs per classroom vary from a few thousand dollars to more than \$21,000 (before BOCES aid) for an intermediate classroom with a voice amplification system, a touch table, four Sharp professional displays with mini-PCs connected to them, and four desktop computers.

Furniture can also be expensive; the ottoman-like "Puddle stool" by TMC furniture (see photo, upper left) goes for \$522 and a foam couch single from VS America costs \$680 (photo, above right).

"Each classroom is different," said John Abbott, deputy superintendent. "That is what we wanted since it is a pilot program using the best judgment of a number of teachers and other staff members. Over time, we see this evolving to a point where we can test the instructional value of a number of

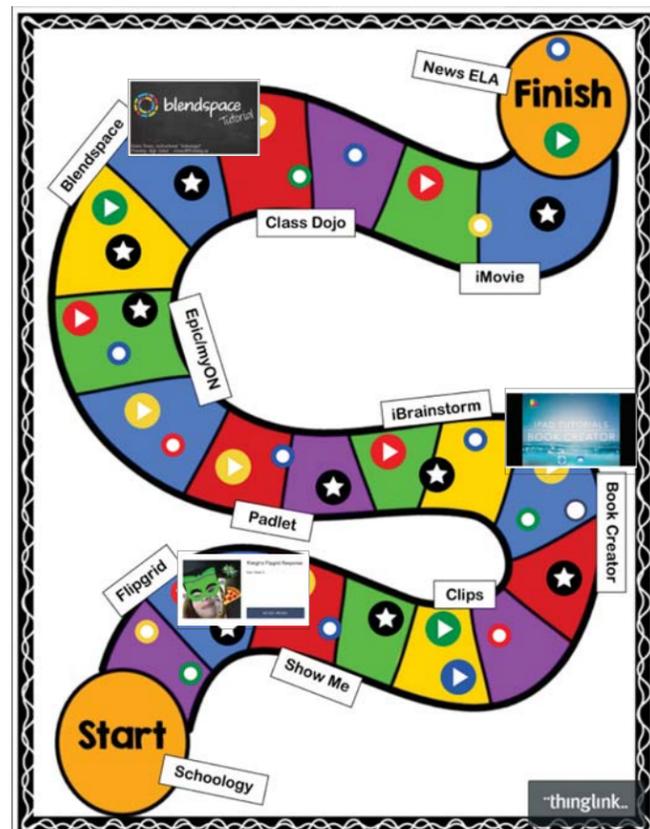


Nice chair! It costs \$680.

different types of classroom layouts and technology and begin to direct new spending to those things which drive the best instructional results."

Technology purchases generally are eligible for aid through BOCES, Abbott added. "The same does not hold true for furniture, in most cases," he said. "A district might qualify for building aid on furniture if constructing new classrooms, but otherwise furniture would be purchased entirely with local dollars."

– Eric D. Randall
Editor-in-Chief



Elementary teachers Nicole Charles and Jill Duquette used an app called ThingLink to create a map with links to about 35 of their favorite educational apps. Download the map at goo.gl/HPKQKo.



Sandra Bigaud, an English teacher from Brooklyn, points something out to East Irondequoit teacher Allison Pryor while visiting a kindergarten class. Photo courtesy of the East Irondequoit Central School District



Participants in an NSBA site visit observe students in Mary LaMarche's kindergarten class work on a SMART Table, which has an interface that multiple children can use simultaneously. Photo courtesy of the East Irondequoit Central School District



Michael Fullan, former education dean at the University of Toronto and recipient of the Order of Canada, spoke on the potential – and pitfalls – of educational technology. Photo by Eric Randall

