

**House and Senate Education Committees
Joint Meeting
Wednesday, January 30, 2013**

Dr. Deborah J. Hamm, Superintendent of Newton USD 373
Natise Vogt, Principal of Walton Rural Life Center

Project Based Learning

On behalf of the students, teachers, parents, and Newton Board of Education members I would like to express our appreciation for the opportunity to speak on their behalf regarding project-based learning.

We live in a world that is driven by projects to complete and problems to solve. Seldom, if ever, does an employer ask an employee to read chapter 1 and answer the questions at the end of the chapter. In today's world and in the world of tomorrow, our students must be able to respond to an employer's request for action in creating a product or solving a company problem by utilizing strong critical thinking skills, being able to collaborate with other members of the work team, thinking creatively to suggest and examine unproven solutions, and to communicate effectively orally or in written form the results of the work task.

Project-based learning in the classroom provides students with opportunities to master skills necessary for the world of work in a low-risk environment. This model for teaching and learning focuses students' attention on the learning through the presentation of a real-world problem or project. There is real purpose for the learning. This is active, engaged learning where students learn by doing.

The benefits of project-based learning have been researched and include an increase in academic achievement, an increase in the application and retention of information, an increase in student engagement and motivation, and the development of critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills.

So, how have those benefits been manifested at Walton Rural Life Center? Using the past measurement of student achievement, Walton students perform as well or better on state assessments than other USD 373 students that are not experiencing project-based learning on a consistent basis. We believe the achievement of these students goes beyond a performance level on a state assessment that measures a very narrow set of skills. These students utilize their skills to address problems posed by teachers and ones that they determine are important – this achievement is not measured by the state assessment.

When observing our students engage with a wide variety of adults – State Senators, New Zealand education officials, and community members that just drop in – I have observed a high level of retention of content knowledge and an ability of students to take the information that they have learned to apply in a different setting. This is not measured on a state or national assessment.

We know that student engagement is critical to student learning. Walk into any classroom at Walton Rural Life Center and you will see engaged learners. Study the data on school attendance and tardies and you will see a decrease in the amount of time students miss school. Ask students if they enjoy learning and are excited about the work that they are doing and they will give you a resounding yes. This is not measured on a state or national assessment.

Students at Walton Rural Life Center have regular opportunities to learn from experts in agriculture and share what they learn with real audiences from parents and community members to international visitors. They use critical thinking skills to answer their questions or questions posed to them. They investigate and research. Students collaborate with peers, teachers, and farm partners. Once they have found an answer – right or wrong – they communicate their findings to a small or large audience. They develop strong communication skills and have the confidence to deliver the message no matter the size or age of the audience. This is not measured on a state or national assessment.

You might be asking yourself: If this is so good, why aren't we doing more of this? We are hopeful that more schools in Kansas will be encouraged to teach through project-based learning now that our standards are changing. While we have experienced student achievement success through project-based learning, some educators might have been reluctant to try teaching with this model because of the high-stakes nature of the testing. We chose this model. No one mandated it. No one legislated it. We researched it and decided that it would work for us. Our parents decided that it would work for their children and have supported our learning a new model and changing the way that we do things. We must also acknowledge that our success is based in the commitment and dedication of our staff and the partnerships we have formed with our community.

Natise Vogt, Principal of Walton Rural Life, has been the instructional leader of the school since the school developed its new vision and she will share some examples of how the project-based learning model is used across grade levels.

We thank you for the opportunity to share with you today.

Respectfully submitted,

Deborah J. Hamm, Ed. D.