National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION SINCE 1982

Alan B. Shepard Middle School
Deerfield Public Schools
Deerfield, Illinois

Transcript: High Tech Makes Learning Personal

Narrator: Alan B. Shepard Middle School is a forward-looking school in Deerfield, Illinois. John Filippi has been principal since 2014.

John Filippi, Principal: Personalization is a term that you'll hear tossed about quite a bit in education now, and I would tell you that We're still beginning our journey towards personalizing education for each student in our school. One of the things that we did as a school, about five years ago, is we transitioned from junior model to a middle school model. And what that means is we took our grade levels and we split the students into two separate teams.

Narrator: Chelsea Gray, Assistant Principal for Student Services, explains.

Chelsea Gray, Assistant Principal for Student Services: Each grade level, 6th, 7th, and 8th, has two teams. Those teams consist of core academics, so the math, language arts, social studies, and science; there's also a special education teacher a part of each team. Each teacher knows them just a little bit better than they would if they were just kind of all over the school with different teachers. That team structure is really nice. The team meets at least once a week, sometimes twice a week, three times a week to talk about students and their needs and how they can continue to support them.

Narrator: Andrea Trudeau is Shepard's Library Information Specialist.

Andrea Trudeau, Library Information Specialist: I've really tried to focus on making the library the heart of the school. We've tried to—obviously, we have our books, but we have all kinds of innovative tools here, we have a makers' space where a lot kids can explore and tinker. I just won a grant with one of the instructional coaches, and we have Legos and a bunch of board games. We are trying to have this be a place that people can sort of come together and learn and explore but more importantly connect.

Narrator: Mike Lubelfield is the Superintendent of Deerfield Public Schools.

Mike Lubelfield, Superintendent of Deerfield Public Schools: Our ultimate aim is to have personalized learning for each and every student that best meets their needs and ultimately best meets the needs of society.

John Filippi: We view personalization as… an understanding. It's an understanding that when our students come to us they're not all in the same place. And we need to meet them where they're at.

Narrator: Shepard expanded its encore options to let students explore new technologies and learn different skills.

John Filippi: We brought in two courses, one called STEM, Science Technology Engineering and Math, and Communication Media Arts. So, based on their own unique interests, kids can engage with things like CAD design and 3D printing, robotics, digital music creation, opportunities to do architectural design, engage with virtual reality, programming drones; you name it, I think we've found a way to bring it into our school.

Narrator: A student creates a virtual park.

Student: I am making this amusement park in STEM. And it's like a roller coaster park and I get to make all of these cool roller coasters. It's really customizable. You can make it like bank and turn and go up and down. You have to have a lot of patience, 'cause like with some of my roller coasters you have to go back and fix stuff and do stuff. And it can turn out really really cool.

Narrator: Christian Ball facilitates the STEM course.

Christian Ball: I offer over 30 different projects for the students to choose from and they kind of choose a topic they prefer or that most interests them. They'll usually have about 10 days to come up with their own projects basically within that category I don't teach them necessarily how to use the software, 'cause they have to learn it on their own, which is kind of part of the class: the problem-solving, the critical thinking. There's some trouble spots too, where groups need the help, and that is where I come in.

Narrator: Jonathan Wolf facilitates the Communication Media Arts course.

Jonathan Wolf: We've got three main topics that we use: digital communications, software engineering, and computer graphics. So within each of those categories the students have lots of options that they can do. They can edit movies, make movies, do image editing, digital paintings. They use coding softwares to create video games and do other things where they're engineering and using coding. I try to create an environment for our students to be in a place they hopefully will be working in when it is their time to look for jobs—in a place where they can get up, move around, collaborate, talk with each other, create, innovate, and then figure out how to do things on their own, be self-directed.

John Filippi: We're still looking for ways to meet our students where they are and to personalize the educational experience so that it's most meaningful to every kid that walks through the door of Shepard Middle School. So for us, that really means innovating in our practice. And there isn't a text book or a manual that tells you how to do that.

Narrator: Maria Galanis is one of two i-coaches at Shepard. David Komie teaches Social Studies.

Maria Galanis, i-Coach: The little i stands for innovation so it is instructional coaching with an emphasis on innovation.

David Komie, Social Studies Teacher: One of the great things about being a social studies teacher is that you have the flexibility to kind of take the best opportunities for learning across almost any discipline of life and find something cool to do with it. Our i-coaches have come in, found something interesting for us, for example, Google Expeditions, and this virtual reality experience that you can take, that leads into other content types of things. They are not flimsy conten-wise. They are often not only

collaborative type of experiences, but they lead to other, more heavy duty types of thinking opportunities as well.

Maria Galanis: So, when we think about testing and standardized testing, and how that links to this kind of stuff, we feel that all these 21st century type of skills like the problem-solving and the critical thinking problem solving that strengthen using these innovative practices really help transfer when they are ready to do the testing, you know, the kind of must-do testing—the must-do testing. We feel these things help empower them.