



Boards Making a Difference

Gilmore City-Bradgate School Board Focuses on Project-Based Learning to Engage and Prepare Students for Future Careers

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“We are a very small district, but we are increasing in enrollment numbers. That wasn’t always the case—at one point we wondered if we could even keep the doors open,” says Gilmore City-Bradgate Board Member Tracy Dickey.

Five years ago, this small district in northern Iowa was struggling. Student achievement scores were low. Many families were open enrolling their children out of the district. Parents were questioning the quality of education the school was providing.

Today, the board is on track to achieve its student achievement vision—making data improvements in core subjects of literacy, math and science, as well as ensure students develop solid competencies in collaboration, communication, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and innovation. “The board has embraced that vision that we will do whatever it takes to make sure our kids get the whole package,” said Gilmore City-Bradgate Superintendent Jeff Herzberg. The district has adapted its curriculum to incorporate project-based learning, including a gardening program complete with greenhouse and learning kitchen, and dedicated time for passion projects.

Gilmore City-Bradgate, a K-6 district in a whole grade sharing agreement with West Bend-Mallard, is seeing more than just student achievement levels rising. “It’s not just the testing numbers—we are seeing confidence levels go up, kids are doing things they’ve never done before in a regular school setting. Even if they fail, they are learning how to make it better and try again,” said Gilmore City-Bradgate Board President Tawny



Hoover, “These are elementary kids. They have blown us away from what they’ve shown us. They’re thinking outside the box, they’re inventive and resilient. It’s amazed me. If they learn these things at a young age, they can do anything with their lives.”

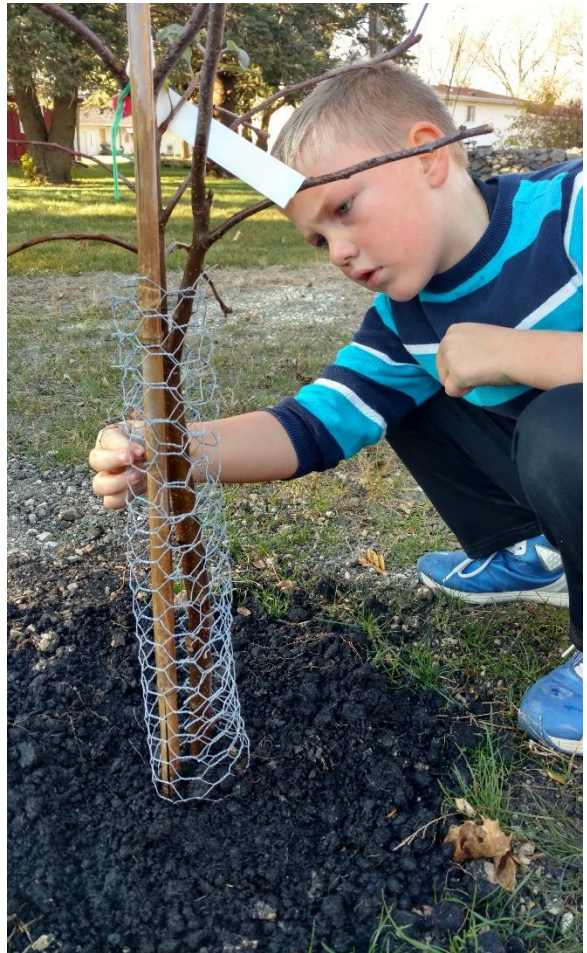
CREATING AN ENGAGING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

So, what is making kids think outside the box? Three years ago, the board approved funding for a trip to California so teachers could see first hand how a deeper learning school worked, including staff involvement and programming. This is where the idea for the gardening program developed. Funding for a Seed to Table manager position was approved by the board, and she was sent to Malibu for training. They tilled unused existing land to create a one-third acre fenced-in outdoor garden. A greenhouse was built with the help of dozens of community volunteers. And an old locker room was converted into a learning kitchen, complete with three cooking stations, sinks and counter space.

“Collaborative and project-based learning is essential to compete in today’s workforce. We are educating our kids so they are ready to problem solve and adapt to change—not just pass tests and get good grades,” said Gilmore City-Bradgate Board Member Mitch Nielsen, “The biggest drive for us as a school board is making school engaging for the kids, so they don’t even realize they’re learning.”

In addition to making school more engaging for their students, the gardening program aligns to the district’s focus on providing STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) opportunities. Students in the program help with planting, tending and harvesting vegetables.

“These kids are owning their grades. They’re talking about pH levels in the soil—most kids don’t talk about that until high school, and we have 5th graders understanding this. Simply changing an approach to teaching kids can improve their understanding by leaps and bounds,” said Gilmore City-Bradgate Board Vice President Beau Jergens.



PUTTING THE PASSION IN EDUCATION

This change to the district’s teaching approach includes dedicated time each day for students to spend on passion projects. For thirty minutes a day, students focus on a topic they are interested in and feel passionate about, while teachers ensure standards are being infused.

“The board has learned that traditional schooling doesn’t meet the needs of all kids. They understand that future success depends on skills like problem solving, critical thinking, creativity and innovation,” said Gilmore City-Bradgate Superintendent Jeff Herzberg.

Project-based learning isn’t just changing the way students are learning and feeling about school—it’s also helping the community become more involved and invested in the district. Many local businesses and community members participate in the passion projects in some way, whether the kids go out into the community, or community members come into the school.

“It’s created a community learning environment and it’s great for the kids and elderly people,” said Nielsen. The district invites parents and community members into the school four times a year so students can demonstrate and explain their projects. Students are going into the community and presenting to city council and local businesses, as well as volunteering and completing service projects.

GETTING RESULTS

The differences the board and district are seeing far outweigh the costs—which, if you’re wondering about the cost, it’s estimated at around \$50,000, not including the additional yearly salary for the Seed to Table manager. That’s worth it to the board, especially since they’ve seen a 40 percent increase in student enrollment, in addition to higher student achievement and community involvement.

Plus, the board has invested in learning together, even growing together as a whole board team. This year, they were one of only six boards that won an Award of Achievement through the IASB Better Boardsmanship Awards program. Dickey said, “We are on track, thanks to great leadership and a board that is invested in learning. We’ve been to statewide and national school board conventions, participated in book studies and committed to educating ourselves on project-based learning, which makes us even more supportive of administration and the vision.”

So, what’s next for Gilmore City-Bradgate? According to their superintendent, plans are in motion to build a produce stand for students to run during the summer, giving them the experience of not only growing the food, but also selling it. With a supportive governance team and a strong student achievement vision in place, the students in the district truly have a chance to succeed, which is exactly what the board wants for them. Hoover said, “You feel like these kids are your own—you want them to succeed in life. We are striving to do the best for our kids.”

Meet the Gilmore City-Bradgate School Board