

# Excellence in Education Exists... Making the Invisible Visible

*by Peggy Buffington, Ph.D., Superintendent of Schools, School City of Hobart*

**E**xcellence in education exists. It is all around us. Why does it appear that excellence is invisible to many in our schools when, as school board members, administrators, and teachers, we know this not to be true? It is up to us to turn the invisible into the visible. Let your light shine. It is when the light is shining that our schools become a beacon in our communities to light the way for higher expectations and brighter futures. The stakeholders in the community of Hobart, Indiana, absolutely love their schools and are proud of them. The light is visible and shines for all to see.

In the 2007-2008 school year, the School City of Hobart received district accreditation from AdvancEd/NCA. It was affirming to hear outside experts share commendations for what is going right in our schools. One such commendation was **A Caring School/Community Culture**—"If it is best for kids, they (the school/community) find a way to make it happen." Many people have asked me why the School City of Hobart is successful. We have high expectations and shout them out. We have a vision and mission that guides

us, and we never stop doing what we think is best for kids. Every step of the way, we have kept our stakeholders involved, informed, and instrumental in moving the strategic plan forward. Hobart is a community devoted to its greatest asset—its children and the

schools they attend. The schools reciprocate and are committed to the community.

The School City of Hobart's Strategic Plan addresses seven standards from AdvancEd/NCA, which include the following: 1. Vision and Purpose, 2. Governance and Leadership, 3. Teaching and Learning, 4. Documenting and Using Results, 5. Resources and Support Systems, 6. Stakeholder Communication and Relationships, and 7. Commitment to Continuous Improvement. We set up a collaborative environment for all stakeholders (including students, parents, teachers, administrators, board members, and community members) to come together to set goals and priorities in order to provide opportunities for every child to be successful. Each one of these standards has goals and interventions/strategies to improve. As the Superintendent of Schools, it is easy for me to reflect on the excellence that is evident, as our strategic plan moves forward. It is also visible enough that our community knows what makes us excellent, because it is all around us.





Highlighting the excellence that is visible in the School City of Hobart will help one understand what pieces must be present in order to be successful and make a difference in the lives of all whom you serve in your communities.

1. Learning never ceases—we expect everyone to learn.

a. Every child is learning and growing.

As one of our teachers put it, “We are individualizing instruction and trying to make sure all students learn through RTI, NWEA, FLIP, Readers and Writers Workshop, A-Z Books, Compass Learning, etc. I don’t think we have ever been more focused on individual students’ needs (which is sometimes overwhelming but very necessary). With RTI, it is amazing to see struggling kids feel successful and see their growth.”

b. We instill a sense of being loved and belonging.

We meet with kids individually and in small group settings. Secondary teachers take on a

special relationship with students to monitor student learning in the form of teams. Hobart Middle School and the Freshman Academies at Hobart High School are all about teams of teachers “hovering” over students to help them achieve.

c. We constantly meet with teachers and use data to pinpoint goal areas that need improvement and note the areas where we excel.

d. We have athletic and academic opportunities and clubs at every level for student interests. Goal setting and striving for personal best is evident in these extra-curricular activities.



*This is the first in a series of articles published in 2010 that address excellence in education as it relates to the School City of Hobart.*





e. Teachers are constantly perfecting their craft and will tell you that they receive high quality professional development. Much of their training comes from in-house experts whom we have trained on research-based practices. Utilizing those trail blazers to train others is how everyone becomes proficient and excellent. No matter if it is using technology, conducting Reading and Writing Workshops, or implementing Response to Intervention (RTI), there will always be someone there to hold a hand and lift the person to the next level.

f. Our parents have opportunities to learn, whether they are invited to blog (such as the *Be There Blog*);

listen to podcasts (including the *8 Conditions for Student Aspirations* or *How Full Is Your Bucket*); be in a parent program for pre-natal to kindergarten children, such as Parents As Teachers (P.A.T.); attend parenting workshops; or participate in book studies and family nights, parents are equipped to learn and be engaged in doing what is best for their children.

g. Our school board and administrators participate in book studies, conferences, and workshops. They are also invited to join professional development opportunities with teachers and parents. One of our favorite book studies is *Failure is Not an Option*.

2. Technology is the norm—Everyone



*A day in the life of students attending Hobart High School is engaging and filled with project-based curriculum opportunities. Project Lead the Way BioMedical students research and present grant-writing projects with proposed cures for breast cancer using gene and nanotechnology.*

is more engaged and productive when using technology tools.

a. Wireless networks exist in every building, with the schools offering ubiquitous computing as student laptops are close to a 1:1 ratio at the high school, and the elementary and middle schools having a 2:1 ratio.

b. Teachers have projection systems, as well as tablets and responders, for interactive learning. One of our teachers commented, "The technology in EVERY classroom is great. The resources we have at our fingertips and the convenience of having an interactive lesson with



our students with the technology tools is wonderful. I feel like this should be a college classroom versus an elementary school."

- c. Technology tools make learning more relevant and replicate the real world in terms of problem-solving and experiential learning. Project-based/Problem-based learning is everywhere. Imagine the following:

*A day in the life of the students attending Hobart High School is engaging and filled with opportunities. Broadcast Media students' program continuous video, incorporating items such as school event coverage and various project-based curriculum activities. Business and Marketing classes run their own student credit union and cookie business in "The Brickie Stop." Information Technology (IT) classes assist with deploying technology and running the wireless network. The Emergency Rescue Technology Academy offers senior citizens free blood pressure screenings. The Criminal Justice class assists in fingerprinting elementary school children. The Technical Theatre class prepares the Blackbox Theatre for an intimate evening of poetry reading. The student-run Brickie Kidz Pre-school is doing read alouds with its early childhood development class. Project Lead*



*the Way BioMedical students are presenting grant opportunities for curing breast cancer through gene and nanotechnology research. Project Lead the Way Engineering students are distant learning with other students on the design of a cell phone charger for student lockers. Twenty-first century classrooms are definitely engaging.*

- d. School board members took on

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the challenge of using technology for school board business. They have gone green with electronic board packets. In addition, their meetings are electronic, with the public able to watch and monitor voting as it occurs at meetings.

3. Communication is abundant—Over communicate.

a. Public presentations are important for giving stakeholders opportunities to see children in action. Every school board meeting begins with a presentation involving students and what they are achieving in their learning environments. Children are definitely our business at every meeting.

b. Who says paper newsletters are out? Our community expects *Focus on Education* twice a year. These publications are full of stories about our school improvement goals, along with student highlights and upcoming events to attend at the various schools. Of course, patrons can read it online, but the print copy is like a commemorative edition that they share with friends and relatives. School newsletters are a big hit as well.

c. Websites have to be up-to-date and offer new and exciting information. If you do not post new information regularly, there is no reason for patrons to visit your website. Our Headlines and Announcements are favorite front page hits.

d. Our Parent Portal offers a simple way to monitor a child's progress. It is a must-have for every district.

e. Use technology to communicate.

i. School City of Hobart uses a broadcast alert system to keep the community informed. Announcing school closures should not be the only use for





this valuable tool. Interact with your community by announcing events, standardized testing, tips for homework, tips for handling the flu, etc.

- ii. We host teacher web pages that are interactive with projects.
- iii. We blog and create podcasts for our parents and the community.
- iv. We offer photo galleries and media clips of events.

4. Service is paramount—Creating a community that is caring benefits all.

- a. TeamLEAD is an anti-bully mentorship program that provides leadership training for upperclassmen at every level to mentor younger classmen.
- b. Senior citizens are very important in our community. We are community schools. Our high school's Performing Arts Department provides free performances for senior citizens on a special day and, in conjunction with the events, our Food Service Department provides formal dinners to make the evening special. Our Psychology Club rakes leaves and washes windows, as well as decorates for seasonal holidays. We visit nursing homes and offer aerobics, games, and dancing. These are occasions to be kind and to do for others.

c. Our schools regularly support the local food pantry. Whether it is collecting, gathering, or stocking shelves, our students are actively engaged. One of our elementary schools' bookstores regularly donates money for perishables at the food pantry, while our other schools collect food items. As members of the local Kiwanis commented, "The JROTC is like a machine when it



comes to unpacking bags of groceries collected around the entire community and restocking the pantry's food shelves."

- d. Our students are bell ringers for the Salvation Army.
- e. Keeping our community clean is a big task that the schools have taken to heart. We are involved with Mighty Acorns through the Shirley Heinz Land Trust and the Field Museum in Chicago. Whether it is cleaning, painting, or spreading mulch in the community parks, our students do it all.
- f. All schools in Hobart support Riley Hospital for Children. In addition, they host a Relay for Life cancer walk.

Our stakeholders know that opportunities are everywhere in the School City of Hobart. Our number one focus is children. As one of our teachers commented, "I think that all of the kids here in Hobart know that we, as teachers, administrators, and support persons, care about them and what happens to them. We show it through words and actions. Nothing is dismissed as impossible—anything is possible. We somehow find a way to make it happen. If I were a child, I would be inspired by this and would do my best to live up to the expectations of all who were helping me succeed. That is what makes Hobart schools excellent. That is what I am most proud of, and that is why I love to come to work every day."

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dard, not the exception in the School City of Hobart. We expect EVERYONE to LEARN and KEEP LEARNING. TECHNOLOGY is a tool used seamlessly, which offers teachers, students, and parents opportunities to communicate, monitor, and extend learning. COMMUNICATION is a means of sharing. SERVICE is a priority that creates caring citizens. Make the invisible visible. Shout it out. Being visible with your community invites participation and extends an open hand for partners to join in providing excellence for children. Our community is proud of its schools and truly believes, "Once a Brickie, Always a Brickie!"

Visit our web site to learn more.  
<http://www.hobart.k12.in.us> 

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