

Thinking and Learning on Display



“Flattening the walls” is a term coined by my friend and colleague, Tony Sinanis, to describe the idea that we are using technology as a vehicle to “tell our own stories,” opening our classrooms to collaborative perspective. This requires a trusting culture, and great teachers given the opportunity to spread their greatness.

But what happens when we, as principals, have walls up between two classrooms that are adjacent to each other in our own school buildings? What happens when learning in one classroom does not necessarily align to another? What happens when we have walls in our buildings that are isolating pockets of excellence? How do we extend learning experiences outside of those classrooms, into our hallways, so that teachers’ and students’ experiences aren’t confined by those walls? How do we build a culture focused on collaboration, trust, feedback, and most importantly student and staff learning?

The Answer: Process Boards

A typical collaboration approach is to hold grade conferences or articulation meetings so teachers are given opportunities to share best practices. Rarely do first- and fourth-grade teachers visit each other’s classrooms to learn from one another or plan together. Some colleagues I know begin faculty conferences displaying photographs of great work or bulletin boards they see in various classrooms to highlight best practices and begin conversations.

A practice that we’ve implemented at Old Bethpage Elementary School that inherently flattens the walls and extends learning into the hallways

is the use of process boards. I first became familiar with the process as a literacy coach in New York City. I worked closely with teachers to display teaching objectives and student learning in various stages in the hallways of our school. We called the displays process boards because they presented the classroom’s pathways for learning. The goal was to assist teachers in implementing the workshop model. Creating transparency not only assisted teachers in this shift, but invited students into the process. After sharing my experiences with the staff at Old Bethpage Elementary, we made a conscious effort to incorporate the method.

We decided to use our hallway bulletin boards to display learning as a process. Typically these boards displayed finished products that all looked similar in terms of the content or artwork. But when you walk down our hallways today, you will see different stages of learning that consist of anchor charts, student-generated sticky notes, drafts, design plans, photographs of students collaborating, graphs in progress, motivating songs, and exit tickets.

Exit tickets are a form of assessment that quickly evaluate students’ understanding of a big idea. Students fill it out with an answer to a question, a solution to a problem, or a response to what they’ve learned. The tickets assess what students learned and can be used to plan next units.

Bulletin boards are built over several lessons or weeks to reflect essential questions, student work showcasing the different stages, and new understandings. Essentially, you walk down the hallways and observe stages of learning that occur behind those classroom walls.

Outcomes


One of the most powerful results that we have observed as a staff is the number of students who stop to read the bulletin boards, especially when new work is posted. The children are excited about the work and look to learn from peers in different classrooms. The days of perfect pieces of student work being displayed are long gone, and instead

we have cultivated a culture built on the growth mindset, where we celebrate effort (both within students and staff) and learning as a community. Curiosity and inquiry drive conversations in the hallway and allow access for even our learners who struggle the most to be part of the learning process.

Whether it's thinking about an approach to problems posed on a board or an opportunity for students to reflect on a teaching point, we are transforming our hallways into areas for thinking and learning. There is no need for a system to ensure boards are changed monthly or kept up to date because the boards co-exist with the learning that occurs in the classrooms. Student learning drives the timeline for changing the bulletin boards.

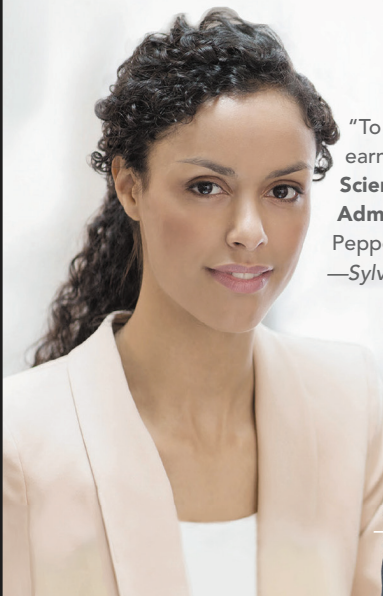
Visiting teachers from neighboring districts have come to learn more about the purpose of process boards. Our own teachers reflect on their colleagues' boards and can be heard talking about the different ways to present learning objectives. Parents visit and without even stepping foot into classrooms, understand the various lessons that took place to present big ideas in the curriculum.

Showing the various stages of student learning—as opposed to displaying perfect, final pieces—requires a cultural shift. To accomplish the shift, principals should shape agendas for faculty and grade conferences to include time for teachers to collaborate and reflect on what student learning looks like in specific units of study. Principals should also grant time for faculty to share evidence of student growth over time.

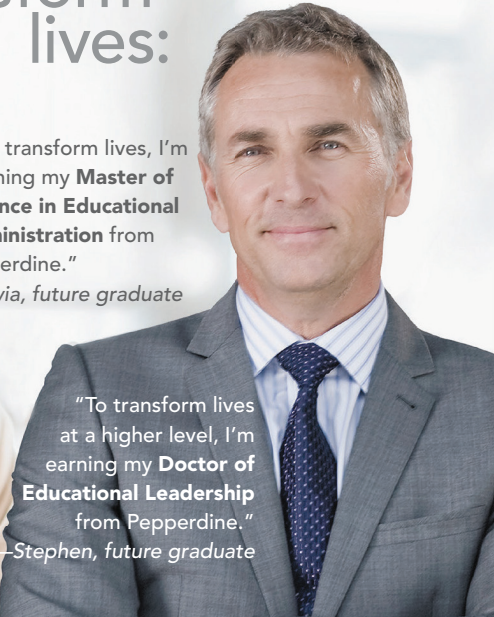
Using process boards should develop organically and should include everyone's voice. As a result, the culture will reflect a vision where all constituents are invited into meaningful conversations about student engagement, the process of learning, the value of a growth mindset, and the significance of teaching habits of thinking. 

Suzanne Gray is principal of Old Bethpage Elementary School in Old Bethpage, New York.

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