

Mann students dive into New Tech program



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Students at J.L. Mann take to tech on the first day of school as they pioneer a new way of learning.



The newly minted laptops rested on pods of desks in the empty classroom, their screens dark but upright, awaiting a group of freshmen who will pioneer a new way of learning.

(Photo: MYKAL McELDOWNEY, Staff)

It's a new way of learning in the New Tech program at J.L. Mann. MYKAL McELDOWNEY/Staff

The J.L. Mann freshmen who will use them were across the hall, standing in circles, discussing the structure of the rules they will impose on themselves as part of program for learning that's brand new to the Upstate.

They had hit a wall before lunchtime. They were tasked with acting out a team-building skit but couldn't remember one another's names. So, they were learning them and would come back after lunch to give it another go.

Eventually, they will rely on one another to succeed — and the room next door will be aglow.

"It puts students in control of their learning in a way I've not seen before," said Cindy Alsip, whose title has changed from assistant principal to director of New Tech @ J.L. Mann, a new program that teaches students through a four-year, project-based curriculum.

It's not an experiment. It's the future of Mann. This group of freshmen — about one-fourth of the entire freshman class — will be the first to graduate under the New Tech program.

The same is true for Carolina High School, though the program there is spread across the entire freshman class.

The program uses a curriculum in which class subjects are integrated to develop understanding of a common theme. For instance, World Bio integrates geography with biology, Quantitative Thinking combines physical science with Algebra I.

The integrated classes are taught by two teachers out of six total allotted for the program.

The four-year planned curriculum will allow for AP credit and dual-course college credit.

Students are assigned projects and work together to determine the direction of the projects.

What is learned is more important than whether a project fails, Alsip said, much as entrepreneurs are encouraged to innovate even if an original idea didn't succeed.

By the end of their four years, they will have completed an internship or senior project.

The idea, Alsip said, is to have them ready for work and college with experiences closely related to the type of work that will be required. Students will be trained in Adobe and will be taught how to compile multimedia portfolios.

They communicate and set standards for the rules they will follow, she said — such as when cell phones can be used and whether a laptop screen is down or up when a teacher is talking.

Both Mann and Carolina joined the New Tech Network used in 134 schools in 23 states and Australia, including two schools in South Carolina, with a \$2.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

At Mann, 118 students, including some sophomores, are enrolled with 150 budgeted. The program is available to both magnet and zoned students.

Teachers were required to receive a year of professional development and ultimately will receive 600 total hours of professional development over the first five years.

Both teachers and students were offered the opportunity to opt in, though it took some convincing at first, Principal Charlie Mayfield said.

Teachers were sent to investigate other New Tech programs in Indiana, Texas, California and elsewhere across the country.

Josh Eversole, a social studies teacher for seven years, said he was hesitant.

"I kind of felt like I was too set in my ways to change anything," Eversole said.

The trips to other schools confirmed his decision. The students appeared confident and accountable to themselves.

Teachers won't be surprised at first if students select friends to be on teams, he said. However, by the end of the year, all of the students will have worked with one another.

The nature of the program itself will discourage cliques, as students become aware of how teams accomplish specific goals, Alsip said.

"They learn very quickly that you don't want to have to look at your friend and say, 'You're not doing a good job,'" she said. "You avoid looking for your friends after a while. You want people who can do good work."

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