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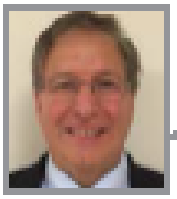
Technology drives education — and the reverse



FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT'S OFFICE

STEVE HADDAD

Every year some 35,000 jobs open in the technology field and several thousand of those are right here in Massachusetts. That's why we're exceptionally proud of the robotics/technology program we have at Murdock, one unequalled anywhere in the region and which gives families another reason to stay at or come to our high school.

Officially, we call it the Engineering for the 21st Century Project and you may have heard that in order to fund it we received an $86,000 grant from Capital Skills, which Governor Baker created last year. Murdock is one of just 25 schools across the state to have been honored by Capital Skills which meant our vision was being recognized and rewarded.

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When Capital Skills sent us that letter and gave us that check, a large one for a small school, they said our program is designed to "connect high school students to new career-oriented classes in computer science, video game design, web design and advanced robotics programming." Let me tell you what that means in practical day-to-day terms and how that will make a difference for our students once they finish high school.

Mike Fontaine's third floor high school classroom, where he's teaching an honors Computer Science principles course which we hope will morph into an Advanced Placement class is a state of the art facility, featuring big screen monitors and a 3-D printer and lots of space befitting a vibrant and growing program. Physical surroundings can make a difference and students enrolled in the class are working in a bright, energetic environment.

As part of the class, students will have the opportunity to design apps and programs of their own and that's where Google comes in. Most of us know how to use Google as kind of an encyclopedia or wide-ranging answer book but it also includes a lot of tools with which students will be able to utilize their own games and web designs. This is important because if they're interested in employment in the tech field, the creativity they're being allowed and encouraged to use will serve them well in an industry which by its very nature thrives on outside-the-box thinking.

We're trying to get students interested even before they reach high school and we'd especially like to see more girls follow that path since studies suggest girls tend to become less interested as they get older for a variety of reasons. We want to reverse that trend. The middle school under teacher Sheila Hunt has an engineering club and middle school students have visited the high school program to see what opportunities lie ahead. School librarian Jenna Morin has collaborated with Mike and Sheila to offer students exposure to many technological possibilities. Jenna has something called "maker spaces" which enables students to explore different facets of technology and coding without the pressures of being graded on their work.

All of these are designed to fulfill our primary responsibility — preparing students for life after high school. We are confident the background and knowledge they are gaining at Murdock will have them ready to fill entry-level positions at companies like Google if they choose to look for jobs after graduation and will as well have them ready for upper-level college courses.

In a world ruled by technology, we have an obligation to have our students as ready as we can to deal with ever-changing challenges. Murdock is well-positioned to do just that. Thanks to our teachers we're the undisputed leaders in the region when it comes to technology education and we're going to continue to build on our pioneering program.

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