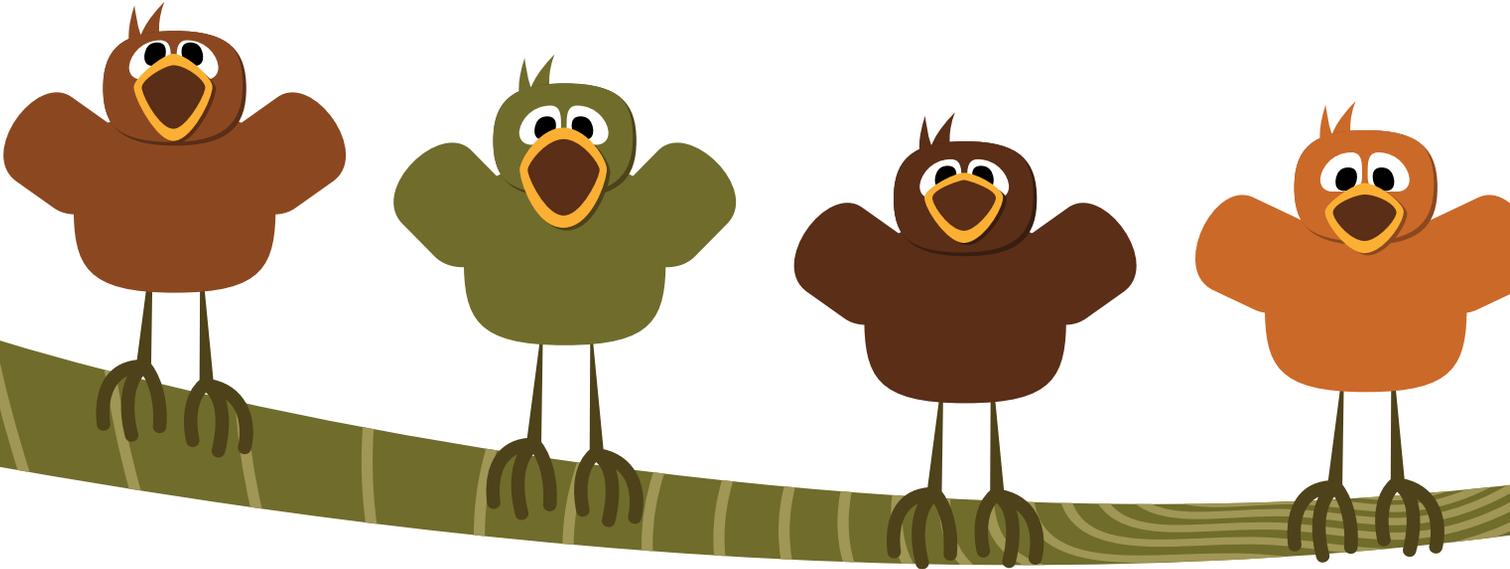


By Shannon McClintock Miller

# Student Voices for Change

Van Meter Community School in Iowa encourages students to speak to lawmakers, education leaders, and policy makers about the role technology has played in the transformation of their school.



In the fall of 2009, Van Meter Community School in Iowa adopted a one-to-one laptop initiative in grades 6–12 and a strong technology focus throughout the district. Since that time, an atmosphere of respect, creativity, collaboration, and connection as well as independent thinking and learning has prevailed at our school. Today, Van Meter has become a source of inspiration for educational transformation. It is a place where students find their passion.

We, the leaders and teachers of the school, have had many requests to speak about this educational transformation, and we could have attended these presentations by ourselves. But from the beginning, we knew that ours were not the voices others needed to hear. It was the words of our students that would make the greatest impact to create a change in education and the future of all young people. A new voice for change has emerged—not only within the school but throughout Iowa, the United States, and the world. It is the voice of the students.

## Students Speak for Ed Tech

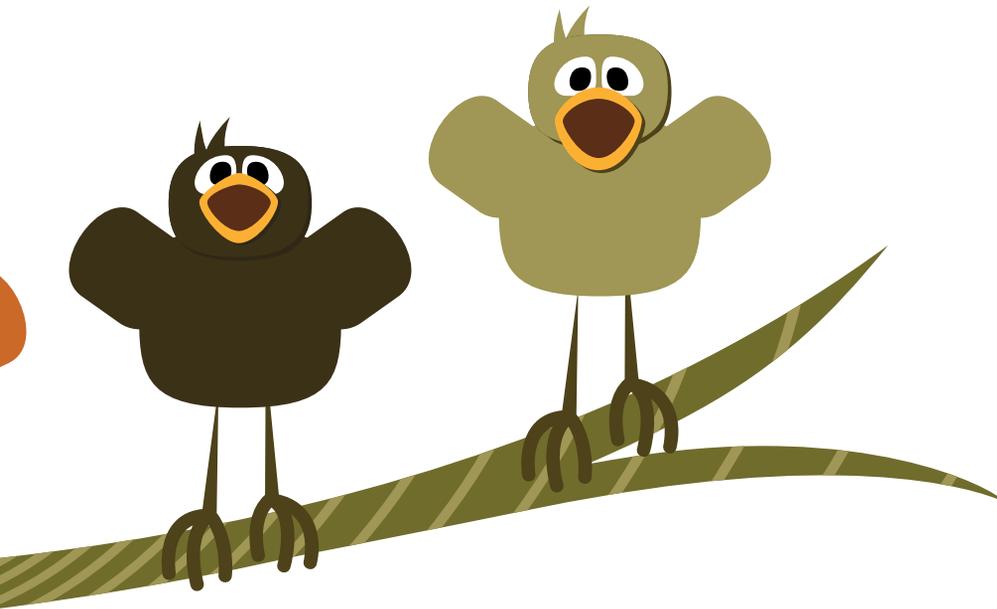
This is the story of how the Van Meter students became an inspiration and have encouraged others to make changes at their schools around the world. This journey started in January 2010. Van Meter had been asked to give a testimonial to the Iowa House and Senate Education Appropriations Committee. The administrators and seven students in grades 5–12 spoke with passion and enthusiasm about the educational transformation at Van Meter. The students told stories and showed examples of how their education was changing through creating, connecting, and collaborating within Van Meter School and globally:

**Holly Baiotto, grade 10.** She talked about the virtual reality program at Van Meter and her connections with Rockwell Collins engineers and Iowa State University. In the virtual reality program, students develop 2D and 3D virtual reality projects on topics they are passionate about.

**Marcus Benton, grade 11.** He talked about the Computer Efficiency Workers League, known as CEWL (pronounced “cool”). He showed a Prezi slideshow that he created and explained the leadership of the student technology group. CEWL was started to assist teachers and students with technology questions and integrating different tools into the curriculum. The team is on call to assist others with skills such as setting up Skype, making an iMovie, and posting to a blog.

**Michael Kinley, grade 7.** He played one of the many videos he’s created and posted on YouTube. Michael’s YouTube channel, mike398100, contains tutorial videos about a variety of topics, such as making shatter effects using Adobe After Effects and building a 3D city with the help of Video Copilot. He also uploads a variety of his school projects to his channel.

**Maddy Darrah, grade 7.** She showed her YouTube video, titled “Van Meter Student Connects with Author Amy



education as we know it. I know, the high schoolers were impressive too, but those representatives and senators nearly fell off their chairs when their superintendent John Carver said “fifth grader.” She demonstrated her blog on things she and her friends are reading. When the legislators asked, “So what can we do to get out of your way and let you go?” I nearly cried. I will forever be proud to have witnessed it!

Dop was referring to Emma, the daughter of our secondary principal, Deron Durlfänger. She maintains the blog for Club Click, our student photography club. She also creates amazing projects in her classes and has become well known as a resource for teachers and students. Emma loved showing off her personal blog, We Talk, to the committee that day. She spoke about her passions and how she had embedded various widgets into her blog after Skyping with me at home to get the directions, and she was thrilled to point out on the interactive ClustrMap how many people around the world had read what she had to say. Everyone in the room, including the other students from Van Meter, were moved as 10-year-old Emma explained how her education was different due to technology, innovation, and change. She had been given the opportunity to share her voice.

After the presentation, her dad wrote:

When we had the opportunity to speak at the state house, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. We invited several students to talk about how using technology, particularly the one-to-one, had changed learning opportunities for them. I was humbled by the ability of our students as they eloquently described how going one-to-one has improved their learning. They all did an excellent job of sharing the Van Meter

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Efaw,” and explained how she made this connection by herself on Skype and Facebook after reading about the writer on the Van Meter Library Voice blog.

*Emma Durlfänger, grade 5.* She spoke about her blog, We Talk.

*Josh Porter, grade 11.* He showed the YouTube video “What Technology Means to Me,” which he created for a Facebook contest. He talked about how his view of school and life has changed thanks to the technology and opportunities at Van Meter.

### **Praise from Lawmakers**

At the end of the presentation, one of the legislators asked, “So what can we do to get out of your way and let you go?” I was completely moved to hear those words. I had never been so proud to be an educator. I knew at that

moment I was part of something very special and that our young people were ready to have a voice and be the leaders who are transforming education.

I wasn't the only one who felt the significance of that day. Sandra Dop, who is a consultant of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills at the Iowa Department of Education, wrote in her blog, Next Generation Schools:

I witnessed history today. Several Van Meter students presented to members of the Iowa legislature. They were poised, confident, capable, and young—some of them very young. I sat there thinking that one day we may be able to point back to January 28, 2010, and say it was the turning point—the day a couple seventh graders and a fifth grader swayed the Iowa Legislature and forever changed

story. Of course, I was very proud of my daughter, Emma, as well. She talked about blogging and some other things, but to see her confidently speak to a room full of adults about how school has changed and how it needs to continue to change is something I will never forget. It was truly a great experience for me as an educational leader, but more importantly as a dad.

Emma wrote a post on her blog titled "Presenting." It reads:

I love to present. It is a time for me to show what I can do. I can show how I work with big groups, I can show how I work with technology, and I can show what I do for fun. I think anyone and everyone should blog or have a website and show off your talent. Please if you do get a blog or website DO NOT, I repeat DO NOT, use a manual. You can do it by yourself. I did and you can too. I'm only in 6<sup>th</sup> grade so don't get beat by me. It just wouldn't be right.

Presenting before the Iowa Legislature would be the first of many opportunities for the students to share their creations. At a School Administrators of Iowa meeting, the students set up the projectors and laptops that we use in our presentations along with a back-channel showing the #vanmeter Twitter stream that has given us a global voice. One of the students created a live uStream link to share the presentation with others around the world.

After the presentation, the Iowa school leaders had a conversation with the Van Meter students, teachers, and administrators. We emphasized how we encourage our students to become leaders. Our superintendent John Carver said:

Our children are our greatest resources, and yet today we do not listen to or empower them. At Van

Meter we have come to embrace the thinking that our students must have a voice and be heard. Educational systems must be transformed so as to identify and honor a person's passion and develop their abilities and strengths.

Van Meter school board member John Seefeld was also there to support us. "We are educating our children to be very comfortable with higher-level learning and to be true citizens of the world," he said.

### Be the Change

On April 7, 2010, I took a group of students to present with me at the Iowa 1:1 Institute. My presentation was titled "Be the Change You Want to See in Your School," and what better voices to have than the students'.

Wes Fryer recorded our presentation and included it in his Moving at the Speed of Creativity blog. In his post, Fryer wrote that Van Meter students pursue learning about topics of passion and high personal interest. He mentioned one student who was interested in photography:

Through her personal learning network, Shannon was able to put the student in touch with photography experts and professionals who provided more information but also encouragement for the student's interest. This type of encouragement is exceptional, and the digital networks as well as tools that can assist in this type of mentored learning can open up some incredible learning opportunities for students. Van Meter schools are on the forefront of the learning revolution.

In May 2010, our group was asked to present at the Iowa School Board of Education monthly meeting. The students were just amazing on this day. When we walked into the room, many of the board members and state leaders who were sitting around the tables were quiet and showed little emotion. By the end of the presentation, they were smiling, laughing, looking at one another with amazement, and having

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an incredible conversation about the future of education with not only the adults in the room, but mainly with the young people we brought that day.

Max Phillips, a member of the Iowa State Board of Education and president of Qwest Communications for Iowa and South Dakota, said:

The most apparent thing about the group from Van Meter was not their technology skills. Rather they were excited learners with an obvious passion for approaching the task of school much differently. It was engaging.

### Young Speakers Gain Confidence

By giving our young people a chance to be leaders not only within our school but throughout Iowa and the world, we are giving them the confidence and skills they will need to succeed. We are encouraging them to not be afraid to have a voice. Holly Baiotto is a wonderful example of this. She will graduate from Van Meter in 2012 and has plans to go into engineering. Before the one-to-one initiative and virtual reality program came to Van Meter, she didn't have many opportunities to be involved in presenting to local, state, and global groups. Holly recently wrote:

When we first started out with the one-to-one program, it was cool seeing all the things we could do with the computers. Now that some time has passed, the computers feel normal and almost essential. When I talk to my friends from other schools, I forget that they do not have laptops, and it's almost a shock realizing it every time. During presentations most people are fascinated with the quality of projects, and when they realize that they really didn't take that long to complete, their reactions are priceless. Seeing their reactions reminds me that this is not the everyday school thing. ... It also gives me hope that

someday it will be normal to all students and schools. I know that I am making a difference.

Jason Glass took on the role of director of education for the state of Iowa earlier this year, and he came to visit Van Meter on one of his first days in office. While Glass was at Van Meter, student Julia Albaugh shared the details of his visit on Twitter. She loved having a voice and being involved with such a special visitor.

I have shared our story with many different audiences. I feel like they were all very interested and curious to hear what our school has done. It has really empowered me to share it from my perspective. I think that it means so much more coming from the students. People want to hear it from us. We have voices too.

After his visit, Glass shared this:

I saw kids at Van Meter not just using the technology as a form of paper crammed down wire, but using it to interact and exchange ideas, research independently, adapt to new situations and conditions, and take ownership over their own learning. What was most impressive was that I heard from both educators and students that they were all still learning and exploring—which made me realize we are just beginning to scratch the surface of what is possible.

The students also presented with me at the Iowa Association of School Librarians, and I Skyped them into the Follett User Conference in Chicago when I presented about using social media in education. Throughout the year, our students talked to dozens of groups and individuals who come to visit Van Meter virtually from around the world via various social networks.

### Students Passionate about Education

The adventure that I have been part of is just beginning. It has changed not only my life, but the lives of our students, teachers, school leaders, and community. It has also made an impact on others in the state, nation, and world. It was the voices, creativity, and connections of our young people that made the biggest impression. They are the advocates for the change. They will continue to demand it, and it is time for all of us to realize what our students have to offer. At Van Meter, the students have earned an impressive reputation of being passionate about their own education, and they definitely live up to Van Meter's motto, "Think, Lead, and Serve."

### Resources

Blue Skunk Blog, "When students also teach:

Guest post by Shannon Miller": <http://tinyurl.com/26nlw2t>

"CEWL" (Computer Efficiency Workers League) video by Marcus Benton: <http://prezi.com/mdbgmzc32ryl/cewl>

Club Click blog: <http://vanmeterclubclick.blogspot.com>

Michael Kinley's YouTube channel: [www.youtube.com/user/mike398100#p/u/11/9jO-EPgA0L0](http://www.youtube.com/user/mike398100#p/u/11/9jO-EPgA0L0)

Moving at the Speed of Creativity blog, "Podcast 347: Be the Change You Want to See in Schools": <http://tinyurl.com/32mryx9>

Next Generation Schools blog, "Iowa Students Speak to Legislators": <http://nextgenschools.wordpress.com/2010/01/28/iowa-students-speak-to-legislators>

#Vanmeter—Leading the Educational Transformation blog, "I Witnessed History Today": <http://derondurflinger.blogspot.com/2010/01/i-witnessed-history-today.html>

Van Meter Library Voice, "Student Connects with Author Amy Efav": <http://vanmeterlibraryvoice.blogspot.com/2009/11/van-meter-student-connects-with-author.html>

We Talk blog, "Presenting": <http://vanmeterwetalk.blogspot.com/2010/11/presenting.html>

"What Technology Means to Me!" video by Josh Porter: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2g4hpOKlBE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2g4hpOKlBE)



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