

The Herald

Teachers explore new ways to reach students

Fla. educator touts tech-driven lessons

By Shawn Cetrone
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Teachers must stop focusing on lectures and give up thinking of themselves as a “sage on a stage.”

That's what Pam Birtolo told several hundred educators who gathered at Dutchman Creek Middle School on Wednesday for the Rock Hill schools' annual Student Engagement Conference. Teachers from across the district gathered for a series of workshops on topics ranging from getting students interested in a foreign language to using Google Earth in social studies class to grading strategies.

Birtolo, chief learning officer at Florida Virtual School, an online public school, was a keynote speaker there to discuss connecting with a generation of students whose technological savvy is often greater than their teachers'.

Her speech titled “Jetson Students in a Flintstone's World!” described new ways to engage students using the Web.

Before catching a plane, Birtolo spoke with The Herald. Here are excerpts from the conversation.

What does the title “Jetson Students in a Flintstone's World!” mean?

Our students are living, working and playing in an online, highly technology driven world where they're constantly interacting. ... We've got to figure out how to reach them.

What was your message to Rock Hill's teachers at the conference?

Let's listen to the students and let's engage them and connect with them. We know kids say that when they come to school, they power down. They're technology driven and when they come to school, all that goes away.

What all this means is a teacher must become a facilitator. He's not the controller of all the information anymore. He's the guide to how to synthesize and analyze information.

What are the most important things you've learned in your time working in online education?

Online or not, learning is all about the connections you make. Learning occurs when connections are made. I think online is the conduit that really teaches teachers to think differently. It's a paradigm shift.

How do you envision classrooms in the future?

Here would be my dream: Imagine a building full of different learning environments that are Starbuckish — comfortable — where students can make appointments to meet with various instructors. It would be open day and night. The whole community uses this building — you and your grandpa could be taking a course in culinary arts. ... It would be non-linear and not rote. ... Technology is not even going to be a conversation because it'll be in the kids' back pockets.

What do you say to teachers who are reluctant to embrace the newest technology?

You coach them, because (adopting new technology) can be very scary. Unless you got your teaching degree in the last four years, you were taught to be the person with all the answers. We have to learn to value being that guide.

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