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JOB READY

Holistic approach to teaching business technology is helping rural Northern Ontario French high school students prepare for the workplace

If Grade 11 student Marc Gagnon has his druthers, there will be a red serge suit with his name on it someday.

Interested in a career in law enforcement, Gagnon was considering his future prospects with Correctional Services, the Ontario Provincial Police or the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. It was a new component in his Grade 10 Careers course that helped him firm up his decision.

“I had to put together a brochure in Microsoft Publisher to explore my options and because of that exercise, I’ve decided to head to Saskatchewan to become an RCMP officer,” says Gagnon, a student at école secondaire L’Alliance in Iroquois Falls, ON, an educational facility established in 2001 to serve both French Catholic and French Public high school students under one roof.

Similarly, a school assignment that involved learning to write and format a professional résumé and cover letter helped him to land his current part-time job as a busboy.

Gagnon’s success can be directly attributed to the foresight of Alliance Principal René Roy and his dedicated team of teachers. They had been grappling with the realization that despite their students’ ease with electronic games and social media, many lacked such basic workplace technology skills as downloading a file from a network and saving it to a USB stick.

Compounding the issue, the school’s optional business technology course received such a small enrolment, it rarely ran.

So Roy and his team made a bold move. They scrapped the course entirely, opting instead to integrate its components throughout the Grade 9 and 10 curriculum – an undertaking that required a full year of analysis, planning and training.

“It was a massive project. But one we felt was critical to ensuring our students are prepared for the 21st century workplace,” says Roy.

The new, enhanced curriculum saw typing skills being taught in French, Excel spreadsheets being used to categorize and analyze data in Math, and PowerPoint being used to create compelling presentations in Science. Similarly, other aspects of the retired business technology course were integrated where relevant: online codes of conduct, cyber bullying, phishing and privacy issues became part of Civics; professional business writing was incorporated into English and Career Studies; and, file management was covered in Introduction to Technology.

Alliance teacher Mark Olaveson was a key player on Roy’s team of innovators and is also the school’s technology coach, a position that supports teachers as they deliver the reinvigorated curriculum. He says his students’ improved business technology skills have helped them in their other classes, too.

“The new curriculum has improved their ability to attain their learning outcomes,” he says. “So now, if they are going to do a presentation and they want to use a video, I don’t have to spend time teaching them how to embed it, so it frees me up to focus on the course material.”

Roy corroborates, saying students are more self-reliant and consistently produce higher quality work.

“We wanted to make sure they understood the technology well and that they could adapt their knowledge to a rapidly changing working world. The most important thing we can teach our students is the ability to adapt,” says Roy.

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