

Who's Who: Jim Mecklenburg, Project Lead the Way

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Leading the Way for a Better Future

For Jim Mecklenburg, Minnesota Project Lead the Way (PLTW) program director, PLTW is not just about a job. It's not just about sharing the curriculum with Minnesota schools. For Mecklenburg, PLTW is the way to educate the students who are the future of our state, our nation and our world.



Jim Mecklenburg with his five grandchildren. Grandchildren from left to right: Clayton, Logan, Sophia, Colton and Even (center front).



Hands-on Education

Mecklenburg's passion for hands-on education began early on. Raised in New Ulm, Minnesota, he was a student who learned best by doing hands-on projects. He rolled his passion for "doing" into a career and began working as a carpenter. He later became a teacher and, in 1999, began working with the Minnesota Department of Education. "That was where I learned about PLTW," said Mecklenburg. "I knew it was right for Minnesota and I made it my personal and professional goal to bring PLTW to Minnesota schools."

PLTW entered Minnesota schools in 2002 with only six schools statewide using the curriculum. Now, PLTW is in nearly 230 middle and high schools throughout Minnesota.

Mecklenburg's grandson Colton attends one such school. Last school year, as a seventh-grader, Colton was exposed to PLTW and began building a CO2 car through his classes. At the end of the year, he showed Mecklenburg the car and detailed the processes of designing, building and evaluating.

It is these success stories that help Mecklenburg find meaning behind what he does. "Success begets success," he said. "And if students find success in middle schools then they can move on

and they see their career pathways. I believe so strongly in the positive effects that PLTW brings to students.”

Strong Partnerships

The positive effects start with the partnerships between schools and industry. A strong partnership is one of the key aspects of a successful PLTW program, according to Mecklenburg. In middle school, business partners may judge competitions, like Colton’s CO2 car. But, in high school, business partners become even more critical, serving on advisory boards and helping to determine which specialty courses the school will offer.

Mecklenburg gives the example of Computer Integrated Manufacturing (CIM). Manufacturers are saying it’s a course that needs to be taught but has been cut from schools. PLTW brings back these elements to our education systems.

“PLTW is hands-on learning,” said Mecklenburg. “That’s the way the real world works. Instead of ‘traditional’ education, you are encouraging students to be involved and look at the problem and the challenges ... all while using the math, science and communication skills. It’s all intertwined with PLTW.”

“The PLTW curriculum is designed and delivered within the national academic standards,” explained Mecklenburg. Currently, are efforts underway to help identify the Minnesota academic standards that are delivered and supported through PLTW in both middle and high school courses. “You see the problem, but you never see the application,” he said. “My grandson knew the math calculations because he saw the application in building his car. All those concepts—he was immersed in and absorbing them without realizing it.”

Exposing Students to Careers

“If I had a wish, I would have all middle school students take PLTW courses because it gives them an understanding of how things work, while exposing them to careers,” said Mecklenburg. He notes that today’s elementary and middle school students will work in careers we cannot predict. The skills PLTW teaches students and the understanding they develop will help them succeed in these unknown career paths. “I look at my five grandchildren,” he said, “and they all have cell phones or toys that are interactive and make noise. You can see how we are exposing them to technology. They may not understand it but, at some point, they need to understand how those technologies work.”

Mecklenburg’s commitment to PLTW is more than just a position. It’s a passion for the future of our nation and the future success of his grandchildren, and their children after that. “As parents and grandparents we want what is best for our children and grandchildren,” said Mecklenburg. “I know in my heart and mind that PLTW is right for my grandchildren because I have seen the success in Minnesota schools and other schools across the nation.”



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