

Williamstown Middle High School: Using Seminars to Enact Flexible Pathways

Vermont Stories Discussion Guide

Overview

The changes needed to enact Act 77 and flexible pathways don't necessarily have to involve epic cultural shifts, sometimes it's simply a matter of shifting your perspective. The first rule of being engaging is to stop being boring! The folks of Williamstown Middle High School reasoned that if their courses could be based in a specific, engaging, and "non-boring" topic or premise, then the chances of kids being engaged would go up considerably. As a faculty they designed a number of these seminars. In the video we look at one of those seminars – the Foodie Class – and how they use this focus to help kids demonstrate evidence of learning.

Definitions

Act 77: A policy passed by Vermont in 2013 to encourage flexible pathways to secondary school completion. It is intended (1) to encourage and support the creativity of school districts as they develop and expand high-quality educational experiences that are an integral part of secondary education in the evolving 21st Century classroom; (2) to promote opportunities for Vermont students to achieve postsecondary readiness through high-quality educational experiences that acknowledge individual goals, learning styles, and abilities; and (3) to increase the rates of secondary school completion and postsecondary continuation in Vermont.

Seminar: A class with a specific topical focus in which students can demonstrate evidence of mastery in a wide number of related standards or competencies.

Discussion Questions

- What impressed you about the seminar and its execution as shown in the video?
- When the teacher states that "fermentation was just a means to an end" what was she getting at? Why is this important?
- Consider the voices that spoke in the video. How do the perspectives of the students, teachers, and administrators differ? What do they share?
- There's a powerful mixture of flexibility – of topic – and consistency – the standards – in this vision of seminars. What challenges do you see arising from this mixture?
- What would have to happen in your school or district to allow a seminar structure to go forward? Not for all classes, just for some. What are drivers that might encourage it and barriers that might impede it?

