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# The Community Page

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## New Magnet High School Set To Redefine Public Education

The banner of Idaho's Students Come First website proclaims, "Electorate Demands It. Economy Requires It. Students Deserve It." In Idaho Falls, School District 91 says, "*We're doing it.*"

Choosing to lead the charge for change, Superintendent George Boland and the District 91 Board of Trustees are getting an early start on meeting the requirements of Idaho's new Students Come First legislation—and, in the process, they are laying the groundwork for a new way of looking at public education.

### Striking at the root

A new magnet high school ("magnet" schools offer "unique or specialized curriculum") will open to freshmen and sophomore classes in the fall of 2012—but it will not follow the traditional "lecture, read and memorize" formula.

To meet the criteria of Students Come First, District 91 has partnered with New Tech Network, a nonprofit organization that specializes in helping public school districts implement an innovative approach to education.

Currently, 86 high schools in the U.S. are in the New Tech Network. In the next school year, more than 30 new schools will come on board—Idaho Falls' new magnet high school being one of those.

The New Tech Network philosophy is based on three pillars:

- **Project-based learning**
- **The smart use of technology**
- **Building and maintaining a culture of trust, respect and responsibility**

In the New Tech model, students work in small groups, are held accountable to one another and normally study multiple subjects at the same time. Furthermore, every student is required to obtain college credits (while still in high school), to perform community service work and to gain real-life work experience as an intern. Consequently, students who graduate from New Tech Network schools have an above-average success rate for college acceptance.

Project-based learning (PBL) is not a brand-new concept—Gifted and Talented programs (like the one at White Pine Charter School in Ammon) already use PBL, and teachers throughout District 91 rely on it regularly for special projects. But this will be the first time a school in the Intermountain Region has gone the entire distance and signed on as a New Tech Network school.

With PBL, the classroom takes on the character of the workplace. The focus is more on learning than on teaching—and technology is emphasized as a tool to be wisely used, not as an end in itself.

"Technology," says Cindy Smith-Putnam, Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center executive, "isn't the game-changer. Let's face it, kids already use technology on a daily basis. The difference [with the PBL system] is that they are allowed to use technology as a means of enabling learning."

She sees the wisdom of moving from requiring students to memorize facts and figures to showing them how to access and analyze



information. Project-based learning, says Smith-Putnam, works from a stance of "The facts exist; now go find them."

Moreover—listen up, kids—PBL does not require homework (in the traditional sense anyway).

### Why the change?

The District 91 Board of Trustees, catching the vision of the 21st Century Classroom, as outlined in Students Come First, decided to seek solutions early.

"We see Students Come First as an opportunity to thrive," says David Lent, District 91 Board of Trustees Chairman and a training manager at Idaho National Laboratory. "Our plan is to embrace change and move ahead, rather than to fight it and struggle to survive."

That sort of thinking prompted Lent, along with board members Deidre Warden and Lisa Burtenshaw, to visit New Tech High in Napa, California, where a new world of possibilities was revealed.

"We saw a learning environment where technology was a tool," says Warden, "a place where the students were excited—going after their own education. No student was asking, 'When am I going to use this algebra?' They were using it daily to work on their projects."

Superintendent Boland invited Idaho Falls mayor, Jared Fuhrman, and a team of community leaders to accompany him on a trip to New Tech High School in Manor, Texas, in order to ensure the results they observed in Napa were possible elsewhere.

"If anything," recalls Warden, "that school was even more impressive [than Napa], since the kids in Texas were more economically disadvantaged. Project-based learning makes the students want to perform well academically. They are on their own quest."

- If applications exceed available slots, students will be selected by lottery. There are no minimum GPA requirements.
- The new magnet high school will occupy the present Clair E. Gale Junior High facility.
- Applications may be downloaded at [www.ifschools.org](http://www.ifschools.org) or obtained at junior highs and the district office. They will be accepted until 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday, January 31.
- There are 150 slots for freshmen and 150 for sophomores.
- Students living outside the district can apply but will be selected only if slots are unfilled by resident students.
- Student athletes will be eligible for teams at the high school they would otherwise have attended.
- "Your Future Starts Now" meetings will be held on January 16, 17 and 18 to answer questions and provide information.
- Graduation requirements for the magnet school will be the same as that for the traditional high schools.
- For information call Trina Caudle at 525-7579.

### What about the teachers?

Warden is quick to point out that District 91's new magnet school is not an indictment on current efforts, but will "enlarge upon the good work the teachers are already doing."

Board Chairman Lent echoes that sentiment: "The demands and expectations on our schools have changed, and we must change to meet them."

Teachers aren't replaced in the New Tech plan; they take the role of facilitators, advising students on projects rather than telling them what the end result should look like.

"The Students Come First reforms are a target," stresses Warden, "but we needed a system to make it work. New Tech gives us a bull's-eye."

### Can your student participate?

There will be 300 openings for 2012—half of those for 9th graders and half for 10th. If the number of applications exceeds available slots, a lottery system will be used. To ensure demographics match the rest of the district, current grade point average will not be a factor in the selection process.

Applications are due by January 31 and can be obtained from the District 91 office, downloaded from the website ([www.ifschools.org](http://www.ifschools.org)) or picked up at Clair E. Gale, Eagle Rock or Taylorview Junior Highs.

District 91 will host "Your Future Starts Now" meetings to answer questions about the new magnet school and other changes in the works for the district. The events are scheduled for 7 p.m. on three consecutive nights at different locations:

- **Monday, Jan. 16, Clair E. Gale**
- **Tuesday, Jan. 17, Eagle Rock**
- **Wednesday, Jan. 18, Taylorview**

### No homework?

Part of what makes project-based learning exciting is its ability to transfer the motivation for learning from the outside (assignments from the teacher) to the inside (something the learner wants to accomplish).

Warden asked one of the Texas students about homework. "We don't have any," he declared. "None?" queried Warden. "Well, no—but we are always thinking and talking about our projects after school."

### A license to skate?

"New Tech," says Warden, "addresses the culture. Students discover it's not cool to be lazy. They don't separate into cliques, but into teams, and they begin to value contribution over appearance."

Smith-Putnam agrees. "In Texas," she says, "I didn't see any student who looked bored. No one was checked-out. No one was sleeping in the back of the room with a hood pulled over their eyes. The students were holding one another accountable. They felt that what they were learning was relevant...I was very impressed."

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"This is but the first step in a bigger vision," says Superintendent Boland. "It will empower students to take more responsibility and better prepare them for life after high school."

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