

Schools of the Future Grant Benefits Dyslexic Students and Parents

An interview with Mike Travis, Schools of the Future Team Leader, Assets School, Mike Travis, on February 3, 2011, reported in the May 2011 HIDA newsletter.

Mike Travis is currently in his seventh year at Assets School. He is the Grant Team Leader for the Schools of the Future Project, a Math/Technology High School Teacher, and he is currently pursuing his doctorate in Educational Technology from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. If you would like more information about Assets School or the Schools of the Future Grant, please email Mike Travis at mtravis@assets-school.net.

Mike graciously agreed to be interviewed by HIDA Board member, Camille Chun-Hoon.



Please provide some background about the Schools of the Future initiative.

In 2009, Assets School was awarded the Schools of the Future Grant (SOTF) along with 19 other independent schools in Hawai'i. This five-year grant, funded by Hawai'i Community Foundation in association with Hawai'i Association of Independent Schools, is like no other of its kind anywhere in the world. Its intent is to focus schools on 21st Century Learning Skills and create a community of learners among the chosen schools to share and collaborate on best teaching practices.

Tell me more about the Assets Grant and how it is focused on dyslexic learners.

Assets' grant is about supporting dyslexic learners through growth and transition. In 2009-10, the school focused on professional development of the high school staff, growth in technology integration for students, and better communication with parents, teachers, and students. Key highlights included: having a grant leader with time to work with teachers and students on technology integration and 21st Century learning skills, professional development sub days for teachers to focus on learning, new laptops for student use, academic coaching for recent graduates, better communication and collaboration between teachers, parents, students and alumni, and so much more.

The project is also about helping dyslexic learners to understand themselves better as learners so they are more prepared for transitioning to college and the real world after they leave Assets. This means incorporating more 21st Century learning skills, for example, innovation, critical thinking, and problem solving. This can be achieved through problem-based learning, better technology integration, and better understanding of the learner's own strength and challenges. Having our students be able to express in words who they are as learners and what accommodations they need to overcome or compensate for their challenges is the goal.

Ultimately, Assets envisions a worldwide network of educators, parents, and students all working together to support the growth and transition of young people with language-based learning differences.

Is your project meant solely to address the dyslexic learner or other types of learning differences?

While the title of the project mentions dyslexic learners specifically, our goal is to create a worldwide network celebrating the differences in learning for all of us. The changes we are bringing about in the classroom should benefit most types of learners with a more hands-on approach, project-based learning, the use of technology to enhance learning, and continued growth in a skills development. At Assets, we have whole variety of learners with different diagnoses and what we strive to address is really about good teaching or "Best Practices".

What are some examples of technological improvements that have been brought into classrooms?

The grant allowed us to introduce Moodle, an online course management system. Moodle allows teachers a place online to post assignments, have discussion forums for students, provide documents to download, websites for students to gain more insight, and it enables the students to go beyond what they are learning in the classroom. Many times, we have found that dyslexic students have other challenges such as executive function or organizational issues; so, they forget documents at school or can't remember what their assignment for the night was. Moodle provides them a place to get this information. Promoting online discussion forums has provided students with a new outlet for discussion. Some of our students struggle with being able to express themselves verbally in the classroom. Moodle and other online discussion forums provide them a place where they can have a "voice" and allow them to think about what they want to say in the comfort of their own home without the pressure of having to answer instantly in the classroom. Some teachers have found this creates a whole new level of learning and discussion among the students.

In addition to Moodle, the grant has provided us help in purchasing updated computers for the classrooms. This has created a furry of excitement among the teachers who are now more willing to take risks with technology knowing they have reliable computers for the students. We have seen an explosion of project-based learning activities involving the use of technology over the last two years.

This is just a couple of examples, there are so many more!

What about the Parent Ning Site?

The highlight that you contacted me about is the Parent Ning Site. This is an online tool that enables us to communicate with parents and between parents in the school. The site is the beginning of the worldwide network we are talking about as an overall goal. The site provides links to the latest research on dyslexic and other language-based learning differences, a place for resources provided by the college guidance counselor, a list of upcoming events and volunteer opportunities, a way for administrators to connect with parents on a regular basis, and, most of all, a way for parents to connect with each other.

Recently, one of the discussion topics was started by a parent struggling with her child who has dyslexic and ADHD. The parent was looking for advice from other parents. Within a matter of hours, a few other parents had logged on and provided feedback to the parent on this topic. It was great to see this connection happening online, and this is only the beginning!

So Ning provides a parent resource for the college process rather than receiving the information solely from the school?

Right, sometimes parents get information or advice from the administrator or teacher, but they don't embrace or fully acknowledge the information. However, when they get the same advice from another parent, perhaps a parent with a senior or a recent graduate, they will accept this knowledge and will use this information. Parent to parent resources are a great thing! We have more than 150 parent members now on the site, so it has become a great source for information for everyone.

Can you provide a bit of explanation for people who aren't familiar with how the Ning is set up, and allows persons to have their own discussions, etc.?

Sure. The Ning allows you to create your own website, which can include online discussion forums, individual profile pages, blogs, links to resources, picture galleries, video uploads, and so much more. Similar to Facebook, you can create a community of learners with the same interests. The Ning is easy to manage and doesn't require a lot of programming expertise. However, the best thing about it is that you can make the Ning site a protected one. You can set it up so that members have to be invited to join the site and accepted into it. In this way, the private site allows for a safer community than Facebook. So, members can feel safe that they are in a community of "like" minds with the same goals. Ning sites are usually monitored by administrators to ensure that comments and posts by members are within the guidelines of the standards set.

The high school is moving towards electronic media as the preferred communication tool?

Correct, the High School Principal, Suzy Travis, used to mail home memos when she had to send something to the parents. But, now she emails parents with information or to take a look at the Ning site. Once a week she updates the site with content. She posts pictures of what is going on the campus and upcoming events. We try to update

our Ning site with relevant information on a regular basis. It is important when you are starting an online learning community like this that you provide new information. If not, members might come once and think the site is “cool”, but never come back again if there is no new information. By posting information on a regular basis, we do get people coming back, and the feedback has been tremendous. Parents love to see the pictures, because the students come home from school and don’t tell them anything. It’s great for parents to hear and to see what is going on weekly.

It seems to be more than communication tool. Does the Ning support community building as well?

Yes, sometimes a parent will say to another parent, “Have you seen the Ning site? Have you been there?”, so I will get another request from a parent to join as well. There are people who post a lot, and others that have posted just a few times. But, as the site grows, and people realize that it is a safe environment then they will begin to post more. The idea is that we grow it here locally, then we will work to bring in other schools that have the same mission as us, and bring in those parents, and the site takes off from there.

What is another aspect of the grant?

One of the other aspects of the grant that I didn’t talk about before was the area of academic coaching. Graduating seniors are paired with a teacher at Assets who he/she trusts and the teacher offers advice and help throughout the first year of college. We are still testing out this concept with small groups of graduating seniors, but we have found some great success. The teacher, who has a strong relationship with the student already, is there for the student throughout the year. The coaching usually involves helping the student to plan out big projects, maybe help with editing of papers, or just be there as a trusted adult in times of struggle. Transition, especially for dyslexic students, can be difficult; having someone to talk to on a regular basis, who isn’t a parent, can be a big benefit.

In addition, we have grown our connections to alumni and started to have them come back and talk to the current juniors and seniors to offer advice and words of encouragement. I think that’s been of great benefit to get our juniors and seniors prepared for what it’s like out there. The former students are willing to talk about their struggles with transition and how the strategies we taught them at Assets have helped, for example, the use of the planner and advocating for help from their teachers to get the accommodations they need to be successful. The same things that we say to them that will support success in their academics (but they don’t listen!) they accept more readily from a peer, another student, who comes back and can say, “I experienced it.”

What are measurable outcomes expected from the project?

Like the title of our grant project says, we want to support dyslexic learners through growth and transition. For the first two years, this has started with professional development of the teachers. By providing them the tools to be successful through Moodle, new student laptops, and learning more about 21st Century learning skills and unique ways to incorporate these ideas. The growth of the teachers and the excitement

of them at being willing to take new risks and try new things in their classrooms have been infectious! In the past two years I've been really happy to see teachers who were formerly not "tech-savvy" become leaders in integrating technology, to provide a better learning experience for our students.

But, how we measure this change is a challenge! We may be able to look at the raw numbers to see how many students found success as they transitioned from Assets to their next adventure; however, a better picture will be just talking to them about their transitions and find out how they did, and if 21st Century learning skills actually helped them to be more successful. We do know that the skills that go into project-based learning are different than what was once a traditional classroom. Students have to step it up, they no longer must wait for the teacher to give them all the information, they must seek it out, work together in teams, and present their results to others. These types of decision-making skills are so critical when they go off to college and have to advocate for their accommodations. I believe that what we are doing with this grant will give our students a better voice for the future.