**At Monument High, Innovation Pathway program heralds larger education shift**

Posted Monday, May 27, 2019 5:03 pm

**By Heather Bellow , The Berkshire Eagle**

GREAT BARRINGTON — The era in which public high school students get most of their education at their desks is gradually coming to an end.

The move to infuse classroom learning with hands-on, real-world experience is slow nationwide, but educators are pushing hard for it, trying to catch up with a changing world.

And at Monument Mountain Regional High School, the paradigm shift is spreading quickly, especially with a new state program and grant money on its way.

"Many students are very disengaged from education," said Kristina Farina, a former Monument math teacher who is director of learning and teaching for the Berkshire Hills Regional School District. "The traditional model of education has been set up to allow many students to go through the educational experience in a way that is very passive. We as a school are trying to address issues that are not uncommon to other public schools across the country. This is one piece of a larger puzzle of how to address that."

That piece is an announcement last month from the governor's office that Monument was one of 11 high schools in the state to be selected for its Innovation Pathway program. The grant amount is still unclear, but will likely recur every year, said Peter Dillon, the district's superintendent.

The programs are designed to expose students to the workplace in different industries, particularly those in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields, also known as STEM.

At Monument, the program will begin next fall and is meant to ultimately serve more than 100 students, and will focus on health care, social assistance and advanced manufacturing.

Sean Flynn, coordinator of the school's career, vocational and technical education program, said the new initiative is a way of better organizing the flow of connecting students with real work, and mixing it with high school and college-level coursework.

"Rather than the classic catch-as-catch-can elective experience," he said.

Flynn said the school is partnering with local businesses, with help from the Mass Hire Berkshire Workforce Board and Berkshire Community College, so that students can take free courses for college credit.

Already, the school partners with Fairview Hospital, Boyd Technologies and the Berkshire Innovation Center, among others, Flynn said. The grant money will help the school streamline this programming, integrate the more vocational and academic styles of learning, and create a new education culture — something that was already brewing at the school.

"It's a natural fit for us," he said. "We felt like we had the existing talent and resources in our building in terms of teachers and courses that we could connect and align."

Flynn said the point is also to benefit everyone by creating a symbiosis with local industry.

"The focus is high-quality college and career pathways around industry and labor needs in our area," he said, noting its alignment with the goals of the "Berkshire Blueprint 2.0" study coordinated by 1Berkshire, a Pittsfield-based nonprofit dedicated to boosting the county's economy.

The blueprint's mission spells out the need for workers trained in these fields. The blueprint, which is based on two years of research into what it will take to grow a solid regional economy, says that the advanced manufacturing and engineering industry pays some of the higher wages in the Berkshires and is responsible for $900 million of the gross regional product. Health care is another major industry in the Berkshires.

**Big changes, slowly**

There are other related shifts at the school, Farina said. They include the creation of Flynn's position as the CVTE coordinator last year. Flynn is a former guidance counselor at the school.

Next is a revamp of the aging physical building. A school district committee is on the verge of making a decision about whether the school should be renovated or built anew. Those discussions have centered largely around integrating the vocational and academic areas of the school, and changing the layout so students can work together.

School Committee member William Fields chairs the subcommittee that will present solutions this month. The subcommittee studied the problem and found that the 51-year-old building served an antiquated mission.

"We're well beyond that now," he said. "It's not the fault of the designers — that was 1968."

The retired Monument social studies teacher is thrilled by the coming sea change.

"It's student-centered," he said. "And thank God it's not standardized test-centered. The teacher is more a coordinator in regards to learning. And maybe a kid who wants to go to Harvard also wants to take an auto class."

Farina says what's important now is making sure students can express themselves well through writing, and working together to problem-solve.

"Not all students thrive in the traditional environment," she said, noting that different people simply learn differently.

Overhauling what is at least a century of deep-seated constructs won't be easy, and will require community and parental help, as well, she said.

"It's a big challenge and a big shift in our thinking about what a high school experience should look like," Farina said. "It's a difficult conversation around how we actually identify what the proficiency is of each student and how to measure that."