

To Our Fort Thomas School Community:

This blog is going to feel like it is about a boat, but truly it is about culture, opportunity, and memorable experiences of immeasurable impact. Did you see or hear about the canoe that our Highlands High School community designed and built from scratch in our first days back from Winter Break. (See: [HHS Students Build a Canoe](#)) Watching it come together a little more each time I visited the school inspired a “wow” moment, as it galvanized our Bluebirds around an exciting and tangible project in the main lobby at Highlands. It is an experience that speaks to the importance of connecting with our educators in person and working collaboratively to tackle new problems and seek opportunities to create something new.

With sunlight radiating through front windows and with onlookers monitoring progress and encouraging our student engineers from a balcony above, the construction zone brimmed with students not only from the Green Club, physics and chemistry classes, but from all across the student body. All told, approximately 140 students (or 15% of our HHS campus population) signed up for shifts and took turns converting what started as bendable pieces of wood into a canoe in a matter of days. The in-school field trip allowed our students and teachers to practically apply all kinds of science-related concepts, and do so while making new friendships, strengthening existing ones and unifying around a common outcome. Principal John Darnell described it as “the best thing he has seen this year at Highlands.”

I sense a great deal of pride and school spirit in what transpired along Memorial Parkway in these first days of our spring semester. I also firmly believe that everything associated with building the canoe: how it came to be, the excitement with which it was built, the unique opportunities for our students to apply what they are learning and the lasting memories it will leave with our students and teachers, provides a *metaphor* of what education can be for all of our students in Fort Thomas.

We build a lot of “canoes” in all five of our schools.

The project came about, simply, from one of our teachers setting out to expand what we offer in our curriculum at Highlands by doing something a bit different. Real-world partnerships help us design problem-based instruction and make learning more visible. Through initiative and creative networking, science teacher Colleen Epperson met Trace and Luke Dunning from the Urban Wilderness Program, two fabulous mentors (and brothers) who agreed to guide our students and teachers through every step of the design and construction of the canoe. The Dunnings, who have done this project at a number of schools throughout the region, called the project at Highlands “the fastest build” they’ve ever had. It is a reflection of our school community’s skill, hard work and enthusiasm to complete the effort in six days. Trace Dunning also noticed that students conquered any self-limiting beliefs. It’s common, Mr. Dunning says, to have doubts about whether the project will succeed, given that the group is working merely with pieces of wood at the beginning. But our students learned that by developing a plan and forging ahead, a beautiful creation can follow.

Mrs. Epperson, science colleague Robin Kemp and others worked to ensure that the endeavor opened a valuable door for students to practically apply concepts conveyed in their classrooms and clubs. We salute both teachers, because we realize that our students only get to go through their Fort Thomas school experience one time, and it should be the best experience possible; memorable and impactful. Later in the spring, Highlands High School plans to organize a picnic lunch to test out the canoe on the Licking River alongside a fleet of boats (I’m hoping to get a

crack with the paddle), and we plan to raffle it off after the event. Launch day should be another in a long line of days that, years from now, our students can look back on fondly.

I am inspired by the creativity I witness among our professionals in the Fort Thomas schools and even more so proud of the dedication they demonstrate to giving students one-of-a-kind experiences and opportunities. I am fortunate to see our “canoes” being built with every visit to a school and encourage our team to keep seeking creative and active learning to inspire our students while creating lasting memories. In relation to our greater community, I wholeheartedly believe that we have the opportunity, metaphorically, to buoy our community by building all kinds of “canoes” in Fort Thomas. Working together with a common goal for a unified outcome is what makes us unique. It is why I love it here! Let’s keep going!

Sincerely,  
Brian