

Kouts teacher brings business savvy to the classroom

Carmen McCollum

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Jeff Swisher talks to student Ashley Shumaker during his Topics in History class.

John Luke, The Times

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KOUTS | Jeff Swisher has brought his computer savvy and business background into the classroom at Kouts High School.

In his own words, Swisher has done "a little bit of everything."

The 1986 Chesterton High School grad completed college at Taylor University, then worked in Germany for two years, handling the computer work for a missions organization called Operation Mobilization. He later worked for a firm in Chicago handling computer operations for several Fortune 500 companies, where he remained for 17 years.

During that time, Swisher and his wife opened up a bookstore in Chesterton for a few years and also worked with middle school children at Liberty Bible Church in Liberty Township.

Swisher said he had such a good experience working with students, he decided to get a teaching degree at Purdue University Calumet.

"Every teacher graduates thinking they are the best teacher ever and they are going to change the world," he said. "You feel like you are going to make a huge impact but after a few weeks the minutia gets to you, things like entering grades, grading papers and dealing with this and that. But I'm the type of person who jumps in with both feet with whatever I do, and I tend to push."

East Porter County School Corp. Superintendent Rod Gardin said Swisher, in his second year of teaching, is an "awesome" social studies teacher.

"(He) has done amazing work with technology to engage his students," Gardin said.

Gardin noted Swisher has sought grants for equipment, including a 3-4 printer for his classes.

"He began an after-school computer programming club, which is now building a robot for the first ever Kouts robotics team," Gardin said.

Sophomore Andrew Blonn, whose in Topics in History with Swisher, said he's nice and a "smart Forrest Gump."

"He's done everything. He's interesting to talk to. He's fun and laid back," Blonn said.

Senior Rachel Elston called Swisher a great teacher. She said he's easy to understand and relates what they learn in history to the real world.

Swisher said he enjoys teaching, and has found an affinity with fellow teacher Tim Schwartz, who teaches math.

"He was an engineer before he began teaching six years ago. He's right next door. He went through some of the same kinds of experiences that I did. He's been very valuable," Swisher said.

In addition to the robotics team Swisher, he's also the academic coach for English. He has taken the robotics team to visit Task Force Tips in Valparaiso. Swisher said the students are working on the robot and programming it to pick up Wiffle balls and put the balls in a cylinder. The robotics team competes this month.

Once the 3-D printer arrives, Swisher said they will share it with the construction design and mechanics classes offered at the high school.

"We're going to get a lot of use out of it," he said.

Swisher said his background gives him experience in how businesses work such as hiring, making money and resumes, and he's using all of that working with students. Swisher said working in a small school gives teachers opportunities they may not have had such as creating new programs.

"Last year, they didn't have any computer programming courses and we met after school and I had 20 kids. This year, it's a class," he said.

He said his resources are helping gain support for academic teams and give students experiences they might not otherwise have.

"All of the seniors are going to visit Google's offices in downtown Chicago in the spring. We're also going to Leo Burnett and hopefully to the city of Chicago's 911 Center," he said. "Just being able to get kids into those kinds of places will give them a better understanding of the business world.

By Carmen McCollum

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Carmen is an award-winning journalist who has worked at The Times newspaper for 20 years. Before that she also had stints at The Clarion-Ledger in Jackson, Miss., The Post-Tribune and The News Dispatch in Michigan City.