

# Teachers told: #DreamWhatYouCantDoYet

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FITCHBURG -- Aaron Walsh's message was simple: if students are engaged, teachers are winning.

"If you have to solve a quadratic equation to get out of a maze while a creepy clown is chasing you, you're engaged." said Walsh, a Boston College professor and director of the Immersive Education Initiative. "Immersion gives learners a sense of being there."

And "being there" -- through educational gaming and virtual and augmented reality -- promotes retention of information, psychological attachment, stronger visualization and more precise work, he added.

Walsh spoke to an auditorium full of educators during Fitchburg Public Schools' professional development day last Tuesday. The event, focused on technology and immersive learning, was organized by Assistant Superintendent Paula Giaquinto, with workshops led by Walsh, teachers and district staff.

Students also provided demonstrations of new district technology programs, such as the Digital Showcase/Sandbox.

The theme of the day (and Twitter hashtag)? #DreamWhatYouCantDoYet.

"I want you to suspend disbelief," Giaquinto told Fitchburg's teachers. "We ask our students to dig deep... and we should do the same. Wonder, question and engage."

Superintendent Andre Ravenelle said he was excited for the day. "I was driving here this morning and I was like a kid in a candy store," he said. "Here is where it all begins. And we don't know where it all ends. But sometimes, it's in the stars!"

Ravenelle then recognized Fitchburg graduate Tara Sweeney, a parabolic flight crew member who is doing NASA research with Zero Gravity Corporation in Nevada; Sweeney is in town this week, speaking with children at the Boys and Girls Club and in Fitchburg schools about her exciting career.

In his talk, Walsh said students engage more deeply when learning is immersive and physical. Virtual and augmented reality-based learning allows students to experience environments outside their direct experience. This is particularly valuable for students in low-income schools and smaller communities.

"I grew up in a tiny town in Colorado," Walsh said. "My exposure to the outside world was television, with three channels, in those days. And textbooks."

Walsh didn't like sitting in a classroom, as a child, and felt textbooks were not engaging. Visiting historical places like the Freedom Trail in-person -- or via virtual reality -- is way more fun and interesting, he said.

Walsh also had advice for those who worry that intensely techie students will become addicted to gaming and virtual reality.

"Turn the players into creators," he said. "It demystifies gaming, and they learn it's much more fun to create games, rather than just play them."

Article submitted by Paysha Rhone, the school district's public relations writer.

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