PENCIL and Snohetta

Snohetta, an international architecture and design firm, was introduced to PENCIL by colleagues in 2012. That fall, Snohetta began partnering with New Heights Middle School and since then, their PENCIL School Partnership has evolved from working with school leaders to improve the school climate, to a student-facing Partnership focused on college and career readiness.

The Partnership Team: The Snohetta team is headed by two two team leads and is supported by eight additional Snohetta volunteers. School leadership, with support of two 6th grade teachers, coordinate Partnership work for New Heights Middle School.

The Partnership: Snohetta volunteers work with up to 20 6th grade students from New Heights Middle School to develop and create short animated films. Students participate in monthly sessions at Snohetta’s offices during which they work in small teams lead by dedicated Snohetta volunteers to develop a story, animate, and produce their films. The project is designed to help students develop communication, teamwork, and presentation skills, as well as to introduce students to technology and design-related career fields. The final animated films are presented at a culminating ceremony.

Outcomes: The Snohetta Partnership was able to achieve a number of it’s goals, including improved communication skills. For example, all students reported they were now more careful to be sure they understand what is asked before responding and nearly all students reported increased confidence interacting with adults in a professional environment. Further, in response to open-ended questions about what they learned, students most often commented on developing soft skills – specifically team work, persistence, and the ability to ask for help – which will be critical to their success in high school and beyond.

Adapting to Improve: Snohetta’s Partnership work has evolved from efforts to make changes in the school infrastructure and climate to a student-focused college and career readiness project. The change, made at the end of the second year of Partnership, was the result of revisiting school needs and Snohetta’s priorities for the Partnership. The student-focused work more effectively draws on Snohetta’s skills as designers, engages a larger team of volunteers, and capitalizes on students’ interest in technology and learning about professional environments. Building on the initial success of visits held at Snohetta’s offices, the Snohetta team decided to significantly increase the number of visits held at their offices. Holding the sessions at Snohetta’s offices has contributed to an influx of new volunteers, as well as the ability to engage staff not able to commit to a full scope of Partnership activity. It has also allowed students to regularly engage with the Snohetta volunteers in a professional setting, leading to an increased level of comfort interacting with professional adults.