Just a few years ago, the Madison High School library was a deserted, unwelcoming place. A peek inside showed a silent room with few students. Rows of barely read books lined the shelves. Lists of students who owed fines were taped to a window near the entrance.

Fast-forward to today.

The library is filled with students learning and collaborating with computers, iPads and whiteboard tables. In one corner, a teacher standing at a video screen leads her class in a discussion on the Great Depression. Across the room, teens sitting around high tables chat next to a student-run booth serving coffee and snacks. Others lounge on beanbag furniture, talking, working on laptops and reading books. In another corner, three students work out on treadmills while watching CNN or reading.

The once-empty library has been reborn as Madison Local’s new Brew Streak Cyber Cafe, the name a nod to the Lake County district’s nickname, the Blue Streaks. Although students can still check out books, now they also can check out...
iPads and access the library’s Wi-Fi system on their own devices.

‘A philosophical shift’
What created the dramatic turnaround from stodgy library to 21st century learning space? A “philosophical shift,” according to Madison Local Superintendent Dr. Roger J. Goudy.

“When I first came to the district, I would walk through the library — the second largest room in the building — and there were never any kids in there,” Goudy said. “I thought about how on a college campus you don’t see kids in a traditional library, you see them in cybercafes at student centers. We were in the middle of a facilities project and had put cybercafe learning centers in our new K-five building and middle school, and I thought, ‘Why not put one in our high school?’ That way the kids who come from the K-five to the middle school to the high school would have the same type of environment.

“Administrators and school board members started talking about it and decided to get Student Council involved in the project. It was a philosophical shift for us because we were moving from a traditional view of a library as a quiet, restrictive room to one that would make it a place where students want to go.”

As a first step, the 3,100-student district created the Cyber Cafe Committee, which started meeting in October 2011. It included the Student Council; the school board; high school and district administrators; and the building’s maintenance and information technology staff. Following that initial meeting, the group divided into subcommittees to research different issues, such as floor plans, technology, wiring, staffing, furniture and more.

“We also researched how the library was being used, compared to other schools in the district,” said Student Council member Luke Ingalls. “We found out that the elementary schools check out thousands of books a year, and the middle school fewer than that, but still a decent amount. But at the high school, fewer than 100 books a year were being checked out. So we decided to put our library to a lot better use.”

A bump in the road
The project had everything going for it: widespread enthusiasm; buy-in from board members, administrators, students and parents; and a policy change to allow students to use cellphones in the school.

But, it was missing one thing — funding.

“Not having enough money to do what we planned turned into a very big factor,” Ingalls said. “Because of that, the project really slowed down.”

Then, in January 2013, came what Goudy called, “a gift from the gods.”

“We had gotten the kids excited about it and the committee’s making great progress and we still don’t have any money,” Goudy said. “Then, along comes FirstEnergy with a check for $50,000 — and it was really bizarre the way it came about.”

Goudy said a parent with a second-grader in the district, Ben Holt, had entered FirstEnergy Solutions’ Thanks a Million Giveaway contest — and won. The prize: $25,000 for Holt and $50,000 for Madison Local Schools. Goudy knew nothing about it until FirstEnergy contacted him.

“FirstEnergy called and said they’re sending a check for $50,000,” Goudy said. “I thought somebody was pranking me and told them, ‘OK, send it.’ The next thing I know, a $50,000 check arrives.”

With much of the planning completed and money in hand, the Student Council took charge. But, even with the funding problem solved, there were many challenges ahead — furniture and technology to buy, floor plans to design, books and shelves to move and walls to paint.

“Deciding what we wanted, where to get it and how much it would cost was a struggle,” said Student Council member Sydney Sines. “Laying out the room was a challenge too, because we had to figure out how to incorporate all our ideas for the room in a way that was effective for classes and for individual students.

Madison High School Student Council member Luke Ingalls adjusts the settings on a treadmill in the school’s cybercafe. The council was instrumental in converting a little-used library into a popular cybercafe.
“We thought about different places we’d been to, like Starbucks, and tried to keep in mind what people would want. We talked about how certain places have high tables and some have low tables and some have couches. We tried to use the most efficient ideas from each place.”

Goudy said the district only had to use about half of the FirstEnergy check for the project.

“We were fortunate to repurpose some wireless equipment and other furnishings that became available when we opened our two new buildings,” he said. “We also had people put in a lot of volunteer time because they became so engaged in the project and working with our students.”

A schoolwide sense of ownership

Student Council members consulted with the rest of the student body as their plans moved forward. They gathered ideas from classmates and polled students on what kind of furniture and other amenities they would like in the cybercafe.

They also recruited students to lend their talents to the project, which helped develop a sense of ownership throughout the school. For example, a technology club student helped install the Wi-Fi system. A computer-aided design class prepared floor layouts. Members of the football team moved bookshelves and furniture. And art students created a large blue-and-white montage of handprints for which carpentry students built a frame.

“When we first told everyone about the cybercafe, they didn’t believe it would happen,” said Student Council member Kasie Beris. “We’d hear things like, ‘OK,’ ‘yeah, right’ and ‘sure.’ But when we told them about the FirstEnergy check and the different ideas and we got people voting, they took it more seriously and got really stoked about it.”

“Making the library, which wasn’t being used at all, into a cybercafe just made a lot of sense.”

— Luke Ingalls

Students also worked closely with maintenance and information technology staff, a unique collaboration that benefitted everyone.

“One of the kids’ original ideas was to build a wall to separate the book part of the library from the cybercafe,” said high school Assistant Principal Colleen Triana. “But after talking with the maintenance staff they decided to create a more open space. They also worked with maintenance on electrical needs for the treadmills and vending machines.”

“I really enjoyed seeing our technology specialist working with the kids on the Wi-Fi and other technology,” Goudy said. “Our maintenance supervisor really got involved too. So staff members who traditionally wouldn’t interact with students...
were collaborating with them.”

“I found that to be a really powerful piece of this,” said Assistant Superintendent Angela Smith. “Because staff working in technology and maintenance are usually so busy with their daily jobs that they don’t always get to see the end result of what we are all here for every day — the students.”

After the FirstEnergy check arrived, students and staff spent the following months finalizing floor plans, ordering and arranging furniture, hiring painters and applying many finishing touches. In September, the Brew Streak Cyber Cafe was ready for its grand opening.

The event was held in conjunction with a home football game and included students, staff, school board members, community members, parents and local dignitaries. Instead of lists of delinquent library patrons, the window at the library entrance was adorned with the words “Brew Streak Cyber Cafe,” complete with a painting of a steaming cup of coffee, and overhung with a striped awning.

“It was a very neat event,” Smith said. “We had refreshments and a representative from FirstEnergy was there, as was Mr. Holt, who won the money for the district. We even had Madison graduates who came back to see the cybercafe.”

Collaborative learning, real-world experience
The cybercafe’s focus on collaborative learning goes hand-in-hand with the objectives of the Common Core and Ohio’s New Learning Standards, Smith said during a presentation on the Brew Streak at the OSBA Capital Conference in November. Other Madison Local representatives presenting at the workshop included school board member Rex Reigert, Triana, Goudy and Student Council members Ingalls and Taylor Goudy, the superintendent’s daughter.

The open, welcoming atmosphere of the Brew Streak offers students ample opportunities to collaborate on group projects, brainstorm ideas and compare notes on college and career plans. Having wireless access for laptops, iPads and cellphones literally puts the world at their fingertips. And it provides a taste of the kinds of real-world environments they’ll be working in when they leave the high school.

Creating the cybercafe also taught them important lessons on collaboration and the adult world.

“It’s been an incredible experience for these kids,” Dr. Roger J. Goudy said. “You talk about real-life experience — how much more real can this be? These kids helped plan it, design it, get it off the ground and keep it going. They managed a budget and worked collaboratively with the maintenance and technology staff, teachers, administrators and each other.”

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We got a lot of real-world experience, between working with all the teachers and other staff to pick out furniture and decide on different layouts,” Taylor Goudy said. “And it was especially valuable for people going into those fields. It was really a great experience.”

“Being seniors, making the library, which wasn’t being used at all, into a cybercafé, just made a lot of sense,” Ingalls said. “Dr. Goudy always talked about how college kids don’t go to a quiet library to work. They’re going to Starbucks and getting on the Internet and working with other students. They’re used to getting their work done in lounge-type areas. That’s the way it’s going to be in college, so it just made so much sense to create something like that here.”

A work in progress
Asked how she felt when the Brew Streak was finally complete, Student Council member Molly McGill said, “It’s not really finished yet; it’s still a growing project.”

Dr. Roger J. Goudy agreed.

“We’re not where we want to be yet, but we’re only six months into it,” he said. “Like Molly said, it’s ongoing, it’s an evolving process. I still want more community involvement. There is always something going on here. Football, basketball, wrestling matches — people are in our facilities all the time. Our vision is to open the cybercafé whenever community members are in the school so they can take full advantage of it.

“That would be the ultimate, because then we’re truly the community’s school. And it would give people another reason to support us because we would become a more valuable resource for them.”

While work remains in getting the community more involved, district groups have embraced the Brew Streak. It’s become a place for teachers to conduct classes, school board sessions and athletic team meetings.

“Anybody who wants to use this space is welcome to it,” Dr. Roger J. Goudy said. “It provides a nice change of pace for teachers who want to hold class somewhere other than the classroom. We’ve had student athletes signing NCAA letters of intent here, athletic directors meetings and staff coming in after school to work out on the treadmills. People just come and go — that’s what the concept is all about.”

Editor’s note: To learn more about Madison Local’s cybercafé project, contact Dr. Roger J. Goudy at roger.goudy@madisonschools.net, (440)-983-4900 or (440) 796-0503.

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