

# Student-run TV station informs community and offers real-world experience

by Whitney Angstadt



**James Wright**

Eight years ago, when Cleveland ISD technology teacher James Wright decided that Cleveland High School needed a video production class, he started it with little money and even less of a plan.

“There was no curriculum, no textbook, no lesson plan,” Wright says. “We started on a shoestring budget. I brought in my camcorder from home and bought a tripod from Wal-Mart. We had to build from there.”

Considering its humble beginnings in a small district like Cleveland, it’s rather impressive that within four years, Wright’s makeshift video-production class blossomed into a student-run TV station offering original programming, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Thanks to Wright’s vision — and the support of Superintendent Kerry Cowart, the Cleveland ISD school board and the community at-large — CISD-TV is now a leading source for school district and community news.

## The need

It all began in December of 2005 when the Cleveland ISD trustees charged their superintendent with improving the district’s communications efforts. The board saw possibilities with a local-access cable channel that had been donated to the district years before. As it stood, Cleveland ISD only used the channel to broadcast football games and occasional announcements. Cowart and the board wondered if the underutilized resource might be their ticket to enhancing school communications, but they didn’t know where to begin. That’s when Wright’s class stepped in to establish the district’s first-ever student-run TV station.

“I told Mr. Cowart that we could absolutely do it, but we would need broadcast-quality cameras and editing equipment — and that would cost money,” Wright says.

Money was definitely a concern for the small district, but the administrators and trustees pulled together to make it happen. The board designated \$20,000 to purchase the equipment Wright needed, and Wright reconfigured his video production curriculum to incorporate the running of a TV station.

The district received a bit of guidance from Amarillo ISD, which has an extensive audio-video technology and communications program. But mostly, the onus of creating and maintaining a television station with content shot and edited by students was entirely on Cleveland High.

“We did it all by the seat of our pants,” Cowart admits.

“The kids were charged with writing the scripts, setting up the lights and sets, running the cameras, editing the content,” explains Wright, who adds that the project forced him to re-examine his role as teacher. “I began to realize that my job was to teach them how to use the equipment and to be there to help them if they needed it. But it was also my job to get out of their way.

“Once I turned it over to the students, things really started to happen,” he says.

Consisting of mostly juniors and seniors, Wright’s revamped video production program encompasses two years of school. During the first semester of the first year, students learn about lighting, sound, camera operation and casting. The students also write screenplays, as well as proposals and treatments, which are essential

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**Superintendent Kerry Cowart**



Cleveland ISD graduate Malcolm Hawkins (left), who now works as the station manager, shows student Chris Keyser how to operate a camera.

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tools for securing project funding in the film and television industries. In the spring, students move into post-production and learn to use industry-standard editing software.

The second year focuses on studio production, in which students are introduced to jobs such as on-air talent, camera operator, sound engineer, lighting director, producer, graphics and animation director and station manager. In the studio, students gain real-life experience, working with top-of-the-line cameras, audio mixers and equipment for live production and Web-based streaming. They also receive training in motion graphics and 3D animation.

### **Quiet on the set**

From 7 a.m. to midnight daily, CISD-TV airs school board meetings, district curriculum updates and special events such as choir concerts and other campus happenings. Programming also includes a sports talk show, a program on teen issues and a children's show featuring students reading picture books. Students have created shows on practical topics too, such as the college application process and how to apply for financial aid. Advertising, TAKS tips and general district information — all produced by the video production program — fill in the gaps between shows. CISD-TV airs reruns between midnight and 7 a.m.

"It's been a wonderful tool," Cowart says. "Through our TV station, we can cover more timely topics, like the swine flu."

CISD-TV has grown to involve multiple departments at Cleveland High School.

"The drama class sends on-camera talent; the business class helps with marketing; the multimedia class builds graphics; and our teacher-prep program, Ready Set Teach, helps with the children's programming," Wright says. "The whole high school supports our program, and we couldn't do it without them."

Board-approved funds and federal funds for career and technology education are what keep the station going. However, Wright and Cleveland High students also sell advertising to supplement those funds. Advertising revenue covers production-related travel expenses and the occasional purchase of special props or equipment. Wright usually makes the initial contact with local businesses, and then he sends students to make the pitch. Sometimes the students create the advertisement or commercial for the businesses' approval.

Cowart and Wright have found that there is no limit to what their students can do once given the proper tools. The students continue to find new ways to improve station operations and expand programming.

"If a student comes up to me with an idea for a new show, I tell them to go ahead and shoot a pilot. I let them show me what they want to do," Wright says.

"Sometimes our programming is good; sometimes it's not. Sometimes the sound or video

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quality isn't what it should be, but we're learning," Cowart adds.

In addition to running CISD-TV, video production students write and produce film projects for Skills USA statewide contests. A national nonprofit organization, Skills USA helps high school and college students prepare for careers in trade, skilled service and technical occupations.

"Students from Cleveland ISD have advanced from district competitions and have ranked among the best at the state level," Cowart says.

What started as an effort to improve school communications efforts has transformed into a program that gives Cleveland ISD students solid career training.

"Our students leave Cleveland High School with skills that rival people working in the field," says Wright. "We have the most current version of [Apple Inc.'s] Final Cut Pro and the most up-to-date computers."

The video production program also imparts skills in problem solving, time management and teamwork. As in a real workplace, student producers interview their classmates to select their production crews.

"The kids decide who is going to run audio or operate cameras for them, and they're tougher on each other than I am [on them]," Wright says.

Equally important is how the program fosters a sense of belonging and direction.

"Most of these kids aren't athletes; they're not in band. Some of them are loners," says Wright. "We offer them a place to perch."

Seventeen-year-old Destiny Yarbrough, a Cleveland High senior in the advanced studio class, agrees.

"We're a tight-knit group. We didn't all know each other before, but we work together and have become friends," she says.

For some students, the program offers a new view of the future.

"Some of these kids have never been outside of Cleveland," Wright says. "They might have parents who never went beyond high school. They don't see a big future for themselves or even think about college. This can be the gateway class that gets them into college. Even if they don't end up studying media production, the students see that they can actually do something with themselves. It gives them hope."

Take 2006 Cleveland High graduate Johnie Busa, for instance. Busa admits he lacked motivation before getting into video production at Cleveland High.

"I didn't have any plans for college until my junior year when I started taking my production class," Busa says.

After graduating, Busa came back to Cleveland High to volunteer his time at CISD-TV, assisting novice students and tackling whatever tasks needed to be done. Through his volunteer work, Busa realized that he enjoyed teaching. Now he is pursuing a college degree and his teaching certificate while working as an assistant teacher in Cleveland High's video production class.

CISD-TV has become a bustling two-way street for Cleveland ISD. Students are gaining marketable skills and experience, and the community is gaining new insight into Cleveland ISD.

"The public's perception of the district has changed," Cowart says. "Now they can see us and be in the schools with us. They can be involved."

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Student Kasfia Islam reads from the teleprompter in front of the green screen during the taping of a show.