

case study

South Scranton Intermediate School

How do you raise the level of higher order thinking among seventh and eighth graders?

How do you broaden their perspectives to ensure they consider other points of view?

These were the questions considered by Superintendent William King of Scranton, Pennsylvania and Principal Barbara Dixon of South Scranton Intermediate School.

“We wanted our students to have the necessary skills to break the decision-making process down – by looking at pros, cons and potential obstacles,” said King. “We looked for a critical thinking tool that would be engaging for students and complement what our teachers were already successfully doing in the classroom.”

King and Dixon found that solution in SCAN, TregoED’s online, interactive tool designed to build critical thinking and decision-making skills among students.



Considering all sides to a complicated issue is not something that is intuitive to middle schoolers. However, it’s a skill that can be taught – and must be taught – to ensure future success both inside and outside of the classroom.”

Principal Barbara Dixon, South Scranton Intermediate School

What is SCAN?

SCAN provides teachers with more than 100 topics for students to examine - ranging from historical and current events to teen-related issues such as allowing cell phones in school.

The tool allows teachers to assign every student a role to play in examining a topic; students log in to the system and assume the persona of a stakeholder – for example, parent, administrator, teacher or community member. Playing their assigned role, students engage with each other to debate the issue. Because their identities are “hidden” behind their role-playing avatars, the students question, analyze and persuade with great freedom. They explore alternative points of view readily—it’s what SCAN is designed to do. As they collaborate within the SCAN environment, students have an opportunity to reflect upon, clarify and refine their positions. As a result, students enhance important reasoning and critical thinking skills.

SCAN asks students to prioritize the issues their classmates have raised. Students then must work together to decide on a plan of action that takes into consideration all the points of view that have been documented.



Scranton's Use of SCAN

During the 2009-2010 school year, six social studies classrooms at South Scranton Intermediate became the first in the district to pilot SCAN. Teachers used SCAN regularly for 16 weeks with a total of 139 students, planning the SCAN sessions around specific units they planned to teach. In some cases, teachers were able to capitalize on a current event or issue in the school or the surrounding community. Some examples of common topics used by these teachers with SCAN were the consideration of uniform policies or a mall curfew.

Engaging Students

The immediate response among teachers and students was extremely positive.

George Schneider has spent his entire 29-year teaching career at South Scranton Intermediate and was excited to see an online tool dedicated to fostering critical thinking skills. His students took to it immediately, and began collaborating in online and offline discussions about the various 'problem topics' that the SCAN environment presented to them.

He was especially struck by how the tool encouraged students to approach a controversial issue in a more studied, measured way. Students expressed strong opinions, but they were not as rigid or quick to assume that another student's perspective was wrong. "When you are playing the role of a parent in SCAN, you suddenly have to put yourself in that mindset," said Schneider. "It broadens your perspective, and the students become much more open from that point forward to all points of view. It makes social studies discussions much more robust and engaging."

Teacher Mary Baranowski concurred. "Oftentimes students make decisions based only on instinct and emotion – which often leads them to a wrong choice," said Baranowski. "With SCAN, and the critical thinking process it teaches, students understand that problems can only be solved when considering everyone's perspective – and all of the issues on the table."

The Results? Critical Thinking Strategies for Life

Superintendent King, Principal Dixon and the teachers who used SCAN in their classroom think the online tool has made a tremendous impact on their students.

Over the course of the semester in which SCAN was used, Schneider witnessed many positive changes in his students – both academic and personal. "Many of my shyest students who were reticent to raise their hands during class discussion were having vigorous online conversations. That often gave them the confidence to speak up in class."

Schneider has also seen a marked improvement in his students' responses to essay questions. "Their answers are more in depth, and much more persuasive," he said.

