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McLean Institute Teams with Newton Schools for Virtual Reality Project

Classroom technology places school system at forefront of VR movement in Mississippi

OXFORD, Miss. – The McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement at the University of Mississippi has partnered with the Newton Municipal School District to introduce virtual reality education in the state.

“The McLean Institute has an ambitious, statewide mission to fight poverty through education,” said Albert Nylander, McLean Institute director and UM professor of sociology. “We see virtual reality as a powerful tool that enables us to do transformative work with students and community partners from across Mississippi, and to bring these leaders together as a force for innovation and positive change.”

The school district recently hosted staff from the McLean Institute and Lobaki Inc. of Clarksdale to showcase VR education to staff and students. Bruce Ware, a McLean board member and Newton county native, has been instrumental in engaging the Ole Miss community with the school district for several years.

Thanks to a financial gift from a UM alumnus to the McLean Institute, a system was installed at the Newton Municipal School District at no cost to the district.

“As an alumnus of both the University of Mississippi and Newton High School, it is incredibly encouraging to see these two organizations partnering together to benefit high school students in Mississippi,” Ware said. “I think that rural public school districts are often the last recipients of this kind of technology.

“We believe that this virtual reality technology will absolutely make a difference in these students’ lives. As an alumnus of UM, a member of the McLean Institute advisory board and graduate of Newton High School, I am incredibly grateful that a UM alum gave a financial gift to purchase this equipment.”

VR education places students in Mississippi at the forefront of schools in the United States and around the world. With the addition of the system, Newton Municipal School District is likely the only district in the state functioning at such a high level.

VR topics include history, health and biology, art, space, molecular science, mathematics, geography and relaxation.

The collaboration began with a phone call from Clifton Taulbert, a Pulitzer-prize nominated author from Washington County. Taulbert contacted J.R. Love, project manager for the Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development initiative at the McLean Institute, about collaborating with Lobaki Inc.

Love connected the McLean Institute to the firm, which operates a VR academy for high school students in downtown Clarksdale. Over the past several months, representatives from the two groups have travelled to school districts throughout Mississippi to give high school faculty and students a virtual reality education experience.

A key community member in helping the McLean Institute partner with the Newton Municipal School District is Randy Cuchens, a local minister. The guiding philosophy of the McLean Institute is built on the legacy of Vaughn Grisham, inviting local people to be change agents in their communities.

“For 33 years, it has been my privilege to share life with some amazing students, teachers, administrators, parents and citizens in the Newton Municipal School District,” said Cuchens, minister of
music and senior adults pastor at the town’s First Baptist Church. “As a concerned citizen, it is my personal desire to do my part in helping students reach their maximum potential and fulfill their mission in life.

“I am grateful to the University of Mississippi and specifically, the McLean Institute, for the many ways they are making the dreams of our young people become a reality. Though change is constant, the investment we make in our students will certainly make a difference in our community for years to come.”

VR education is beginning to grow on the Ole Miss campus as well.

The university’s Center for Math and Science Education recently installed three VR systems at its Jackson Avenue Center location. The McLean Institute is exploring the possibility of a VR workshop for high school students on the main campus.

For more information, contact the McLean Institute at mclean@olemiss.edu or 662-915-2052.