



A Wave of Change

By Peter Carpenter

A tech-savvy principal and advocate for connected learning shares his school's digital learning model.

Ask a fifth grader, “Are you connected?” and he or she will likely say, “Yes, at home, but here at school, not so much. Maybe once a week.”

The reality is that outside our school walls, students are plugged into technology often. They are connected in ways that we may not realize through social media such as Vine, Snapchat, and Instagram. Teachers and parents may be somewhat fearful or skeptical of these new media channels, which creates a disconnect with students.

Like any tool, technology is only as good and useful as the person using it. Our kids long to be connected and to learn with the tools they are accustomed to using. Yet, when they set foot in our schools, we essentially ask them to unplug and learn the way that we feel is best in the environment that we have created for them. The schoolhouse's instructional delivery system does not mirror the way they learn outside of it. But, with tech vision and a growth mindset, principals can help bring schools up to speed.



DIGITAL LEARNING MODEL

Inside a school's walls are adults who care about kids and desperately want to help them to learn. In his book, *Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times* (2014), Eric Sheninger, principal of New Milford High School in New Jersey, discusses how schools must prepare students for the age in which we are living, and not the age in which we've been accustomed to teaching. Our schools have been structured to prepare students for success in an Industrial Age model. The times have shifted, and today, our students have to learn to sift through and make sense of information at a much more rapid rate. So the question becomes: How can a school shift from an industrial instructional delivery model to a digital model—one that helps students stay plugged in and use the tools with which they are most familiar?

When I arrived as principal at Emmorton Elementary School in Harford County, Maryland, four years ago, I immediately saw tremendous potential for a full digital conversion. There were many positive things already in place at this high-performing school:

- Every classroom was equipped with an interactive white board (IWB);
- The school had two mobile laptop cart labs, each of which allowed one class of students to wirelessly connect in the classroom setting; and
- Most teachers used the IWB as a virtual chalkboard. However, teachers were still using other technologies such as overhead projectors and Aver Key Media (the ability to project from a computer to a television).

While this was a good start, I felt like we had more distance to cover.

DIGITAL INTEGRATION

I wanted to see technology as a seamless integration of tools that students and teachers could use to connect with content and with one another. I began to take a number of steps to help our students start to be more

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connected and to alleviate staff and students' technology anxiety.

1 Craft a vision. The first step in a digital conversion is vision. As the instructional leader, it's critical for you to have a vision of what you want your staff's technology use to look and feel like in your school. Develop your vision for your school with input from staff members and your community. Think big first and work backwards from there. I started by taking stock of what technology we had, as well as teachers' views of technology. My school's vision is to be a community of connected learners: on any device, anywhere, and any time.

2 Inventory your resources and determine needs. What technologies do you have in place? What's being used effectively and well? Take inventory of your staff's needs, as well. For instance, in inventorying our resources, I saw that teachers had IWBs, but lacked document cameras. I knew I would have to rectify the problem immediately.

Through creative fundraising efforts such as Box Tops for Education, Terracycle, and Shoparoo, we stretched the money that was earmarked for technology. I bought not only document cameras, but also digital and flip

cameras (one for each grade level).

However, I quickly learned that without focused professional development, tools sit on a desk and are rarely used by teachers. Knowing what you have and what you need helps you to plan for where you want to go.

3 Plan for connection. Once the vision was created, I invited our district's director of technology to do a walkthrough of our building with me. We had the tools, but we needed a few more plans in place.

The first step was to seek wireless access across the school. Through collaboration with our district's director of technology and technology office, we were fortunate to be able to make that happen the following year.

From there, we took steps to help teachers continue to grow their technology proficiency. When it was time to refresh desktop computers, we purchased laptops so that teachers and students could be more portable with their learning. We acquired additional tools, such as student responders, that have helped teachers process information from their students quickly and easily.

We also mounted a large flat-screen TV in our lobby so that information could be displayed quickly and easily for the school community.

4 Plan for growth. Perhaps the most important step of digital conversion is ensuring that no one is left behind in the process. We are working in an era where four generations of learners are in a building at a given time. While many educators are intimidated by technology and don't know how to incorporate it, others embrace it with open arms. Providing quality professional learning experiences is critical.

As Sheninger so eloquently puts it, technology tools are only as good as the user. If a teacher doesn't know how to use them, tools are never going to be used effectively. To that end, we created a year-long process for professional growth with technology by tapping into the expertise of our district's technology department.

After surveying the staff about their technology needs, we met with two technology specialists and crafted a professional development plan for our teachers. This year, during monthly "early dismissal days," teachers receive targeted professional development on the use of technology based on their needs. They have learned how to more efficiently use some of the tools that they have had for years. (Ideally, though, professional development should be conducted in tandem with the acquisition of each tool).

Additionally, we have also learned about wikis, blogs, and social media. Teachers are immediately applying professional learning instruction, and the students (and teachers) love it.

YOUR GROWTH

In order for a digital conversion to occur, the lead learner must be riding the wave for change. Leaders must be as hip to the technology as teachers and students.

If you are not part of social media networks, you are missing out on a gold mine of professional learning. Twitter can be an excellent source of professional growth. I have created a personal professional learning network (PLN) that helps me acquire and integrate information at the speed of a mouse click. Because

Twitter gives you the ability to follow experts, you can learn directly from them on your time, for no cost!

You can also participate in weekly forums called "edchats" that take place through the use of hashtags. Check out, for example, **#edchat** (for anything and everything education related), **#ptchat** (which promotes dialogue between parents and educators), **#satchat** (geared towards current and emerging school leaders), **#edtechchat** (all topics education technology), and **#spedchat** (on issues related to and effecting students with disabilities).

Social media can also help you brand your school and tell your school's story. Sheninger believes that it's principals' responsibility to brand our schools because we are best equipped to tell our own stories. If we don't tell the story, someone else will. Emmorton Elementary now has Facebook and Twitter pages, which have helped me to connect with my community in new ways.

Until recently, mastery of Word and PowerPoint were the gold standard of technology proficiency, and really savvy principals knew how to use Excel. Today, principals must master other software and tools that will help improve their practice. Consider, for example, using a tool such as Diigo, which can be used to help store articles, images, and other information, as well as blogging and wiki tools such as Kidblog and Edmodo that can be used to engage staff and students alike. Next year, I hope to engage our fifth graders in a discussion via Kidblog on a common book about getting prepared for middle school.


In addition, I use Google Drive and Blogger to assist me with communication. To help me maximize various other tools, I use resources such as Atomic Learning and rely on my tech-savvy friends.

MAKING CONNECTIONS NOW

Connected learning is not the future of education, it is the very present reality. That reality will include continued professional growth for

my staff on social media. My goal for next school year is for 100 percent of my staff to use Twitter as a personal professional development engine as well as a way to create what Alan November calls "a legacy for learning over the year."


As president of my local principals' association, I am also working to get every elementary principal on board with connected learning by conducting professional development sessions about Twitter and doing a book study around Sheninger's book. Additionally, I'm exploring Edcamp models as a method to create an ongoing professional development engine that is learner-centered. (Edcamps are free, face-to-face workshops organized and publicized over social media; sessions are determined by participants on the day of the event.)


As principals, we can ensure that connected learning happens each and every day. It must become our imperative. Through vision, collaboration with your district, creative allocation of funds, and staying connected with the needs of your staff and students, technology can be a powerful teaching and learning tool. It's not about, "Are you connected?" Rather the question is, "How are you connected?" 

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Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: www.naesp.org/MayJun14

 Visit the Edcamp Foundation website for more information on how to **plan an "unconference,"** which provides educators an avenue for free, spontaneous, and interactive workshops.

 In **"Flipping Reading,"** from the *Principal* archives, principal Joe Corcoran provides a case study for extending reading lessons beyond the classroom walls for struggling students.