

Q & A

THE NEW Pioneers

Bob Farrace

Bob Farrace: A technology initiative involves a lot more than just acquiring the technology and dropping it on students' desks. What else must a principal invest time and resources in for tech initiatives to be successful?

Patrick Larkin: As long as we talk about technology as something extra, we will not have the level of success with technology initiatives that we are striving for. In my mind, the goal for any educational initiative needs to be to improve student learning. So the initial questions that a principal needs to be able to answer are, Why this is necessary? and How will this potentially lead to improvements in student learning?

Before moving to a one-to-one environment where all students received iPads during the past school year, we spent a great deal of time talking about Schlechty's qualities of engaging student work and the qualities of an engaging learning environment. We need to ensure that learners have opportunities to experience the following routinely:

- Personal response
- Clear, modeled expectations
- Emotional and intellectual safety
- Learning with others
- Sense of audience
- Choice
- Novelty
- Authenticity.

Keeping those qualities in mind for students and teachers is imperative because the move to embrace technological resources is a sometimes-uncomfortable one where many educators become learners along with the students.

While you are having these conversations with learners in your building, it is important to build a conversation with parents and community members as well. At Burlington, I started a series of blog posts to explain why we were making the move to a 1:1 school (www.markjsullivan.org/p/becoming-11-school-series.html). We also started a series of monthly technology nights so that parents can come in and learn about the tools that we use (www.markjsullivan.org/search?q=tech+night+for+parents).

Farrace: How well do you have to understand the technology to be a technology leader?

Michael King: First, a principal must have a thorough understanding of instructional practices and how effective practices promote student-centered learning. Second, he or she should have knowledge of software protocol as it applies to effective instructional practices.

To be a technology leader, you must help teachers understand technology tools as they apply to instructional practices. Most often, I will start with an example of a traditional classroom setting and lead a discussion on a digital tool. A good way to introduce blending a traditional classroom practice and social media is to define the term *backchannel* as it applies to instruction and show an example of it.

A backchannel is a simply a way to provide feedback while someone else is talking. Teachers have traditionally used backchannel methods to check students' listening skills by calling on a student to ensure that he or she was listening to the lecture. Backchannel methods have evolved from keeping students' attention to checking student understanding.

The 2012 NASSP Digital Principals are pioneers in digital technology and social media in the principalship. Read about their philosophies and practices in this Q&A.



Once you identify some backchannel tools, you can apply them to the three formative assessment strategies of providing feedback, reinforcing effort, and reframing conceptual awareness. Twitter, for example, can be used as a backchannel tool. Students can share their thoughts and ideas about the information being presented.

The key to any backchannel dialogue is that it must not only include information but also be managed. Some teachers perceive management of classroom information as a priority and, therefore, rule out the use of social media in their classrooms. To offset apprehension, the instructor needs to set up patterns of classroom expectations—digital citizenship norms—that can be taught in a minilesson or information-sharing session. The goal of any effective classroom experience is getting students involved in discussion while protecting the integrity of all ideas being shared. The skills that need to be taught are a part of digital literacy. The norms and expectations are the same ones that we set up for appropriate social interaction in our classrooms. Any teacher who is a master at classroom management can also provide the same guidance in the promotion of digital literacy.

Farrace: One-to-one programs are becoming more common, and the devices are more commonly tablets and other mobile devices instead of laptops. What do you make of the argument that these devices are too distracting to have in students' hands during school?

Eric Sheninger: Mobile devices become a distraction when we treat them as such. As leaders we should instead be treating them as mobile learning devices and not only educating but also empowering our students to use them as tools for learning. When a teaching and learning culture is established that allows for the effective, ubiquitous integration of these powerful tools, leaders will find that students will use them as such. Too often emphasis is placed on off-task behavior, misconduct, and theft instead of personalized learning and engagement. After initiating our bring your own technology program at New Milford, we saw a dramatic decline in off-task behavior and cyberbullying. (Read more of Sheninger's thoughts on this topic at www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-sheninger/digital-learning-schools_b_1206426.html.) **PL**

Eric Sheninger,
Michael King and
Patrick Larkin

Learn more about the NASSP Digital Principal Award program and the 2012 winners at www.nassp.org/digitalprincipal.

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