How To Create a Districtwide Technology Plan

As school districts are increasingly realizing the benefits of implementing technology, many invest in technology without knowing how they will use it, how things work together, what their expected ROI is in terms of outcomes, and how they will market internally to get people on board. That is, they don't have a full game plan.

Focus On Your Goals

It can be easy to think about setting up a district-wide technology plan by front-loading your choices. Considering questions like "How many computers do I need?" or "What products should I buy?" might seem to make sense, but it's better to ask "What am I trying to build?" or "What do I want my students and teachers to be able to do?"

This will do two things. First, you'll be thinking more about your desired result and building a technology plan to achieve an output, rather than worry about an input. Don't sculpt your goals around your technology; instead seek out technology that allows you to accomplish your goals.

The second advantage of this is that you'll force yourself to set clear goals to measure and achieve. If one goal is "to get every student connected to the Internet by 2017," you can think about what

technology you need to achieve that, but you have also given yourself a real criteria to measure so you can better assess whether your technology plan is working over time or needs adjustment.

Remember Who Will Use the Technology and How

After making a pricey investment into technology, whether it's a new computer lab, a set of mobile devices for teachers, or various computers for student use, it's important not to forget the point of all this tech—for people to use it. Getting an entire district to fully understand and adopt a new technology is critical.

Part of achieving this stems from robust internal marketing and user-support within a district. Whoever's using the new technology—whether it's administrators, teachers, or students—needs to be aware first that it exists, and second, that they'll have the support they'll need should issues arise. If users are afraid of the technology, they'll be less likely to engage with it.

But these are not uncharted waters. In fact, the Minnesota Department of Education conducted a survey to flesh out the key factors that contribute to teachers' success when integrating technology into their classrooms.

They boiled it down to four main factors, two of which have everything to do with supporting your technology users. If you provide your faculty with "On-site technical support" and "Long-term, sustained staff development and inservice" then you'll be off to a great start in terms of ensuring their success in your program.

Connect Everything Together with a Digital Hub

In today's technology saturated landscape, it's worth your time to consider connecting your district's tools with a comprehensive hub such as a learning management system (LMS). The LMS pulls all those tools into a single platform, allowing them to work together and making it easier for students and faculty to use multiple tools efficiently.

99% of LMS users believe the system has a positive impact on learning.

According to a 2015 survey by Software Advice

Even though most LMSs, and most educational tools for that matter, are now hosted in the cloud, they can be just as siloed as their hardwired predecessors. Others, however, are built to unify all the tools you use into a single platform to boost efficiency and improve user experience.

Schoology, for example, is one of the few LMSs that connects all your content, tools, and systems together. Imagine a platform that communicates with your SIS so enrollment data and grades are automatically updated. And think of what's possible when your students and faculty can use your LMS, Google Drive, YouTube, and other tools as if they were a single system.

Having a digital hub also brings your hardware together—e.g., computers, laptops, and mobile devices. Without it, there's no common environment and the learning experience can all too easily become disjointed, sporadic, and relatively uncontrolled.

Having a clear plan to unite your district's technology grid can ensure both your hardware and software are being used to their fullest potential. It also answers the other two keys to teacher success found by the Minnesota DoE—"Access to appropriate types, and amounts, of software," and "Access to adequate hardware."

Plan in Years, Think in Months

Having long-term plans is critical, especially when you're leading a district with lots of varying needs and moving parts. Remember that long term plans that span three years, five years, or more are worked out over days, weeks, and months. This means two things for you.

The first is that you need to set incremental goals. Think of it like running a marathon. You are working towards achieving your ultimate goal, but it takes time and there are countless opportunities for missteps. Focus on getting small wins and building on them, because each step is just as important as the next.

Take going 1:1 as an example. Most of the time a district looks to roll out devices and a learning management system at the same time. While 1:1 depends upon an LMS, an LMS doesn't depend upon 1:1.

Many school and districts have found it better to implement their LMSs a semester before rolling out devices. It allows users to develop comfort and structure so they can move on to what's next.

Second, you need to be willing to evaluate and adjust. There's no need to be fatalistic with your approach. Many times a district will start with a tool that seems to meet their needs, but soon realize a handful of critical pain points simply aren't addressed.

This can lead to dramatic shifts, such as beginning to implement one LMS and three months later switching to another that better suits the district's needs. In fact, Schoology has had many clients who've switched over to our platform because of our ability to overcome those challenges, whether that's our integration abilities with SISs or general ease of use.

Putting These Considerations Into Practice

This article has covered some of the more important considerations you should have when creating a districtwide technology plan at a high level, but what do they look like in practice? Below are four tactics you can implement in your district that build on these key concepts.

Focus on Natural Groups
Divvying up your efforts by groups like secondary, intermediate, and elementary will help ensure the plan and any changes you make are relevant. The people in one group tend to have similar experiences that differ from those in other groups, so blanket strategies are less impactful.

Avoid Technology Overlap (Competing Solutions)
Even though new technologies spring up constantly, be purposeful in choosing common solutions. Not all teachers need to use the same tools, but having a common system to tie everything together will simplify evaluation and help you to best navigate issues that pop up.

Get the Most Out of Pilots
Think of pilots as controlled experiments. They allow you to observe different variables (devices, pedagogies, etc.) in a real world context. Just make sure to cover all your bases including both internal and external variables, such as teacher support.

Be Willing to Adjust the Strategy
As mentioned above, long-term plans are worked out over days, weeks, and months. Regular evaluation will help you understand what is working and what isn't, giving you the insight you need to improve your processes. Take this feedback seriously and adjust as necessary. ●

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