Proven Strategies for Winning Ed Tech Grants

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When the nation’s second-largest union high school district decided to equip 6,500 7th graders (and 44,000 over the next six years) with iPads, they needed to pair those iPads with the best LMS available. A great 1:1 program—where every student gets their own device—demands an LMS that's intuitive, user-friendly, with uber-responsive support and a seamless implementation process. That’s why Sweetwater Union High School District decided to partner with Canvas. It’s 21st Century education on a 21st Century device with a 21st Century LMS.

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7 Proven Strategies for Winning Ed Tech Grants
In the fierce competition for funding, here’s how you can make your application — whether it’s in writing or on video — rise to the top of the heap. By John K. Waters
A Laptop in Every Backpack

As I sat down to write about schools’ ongoing struggle to pay for classroom technology, I got a great assist from the news when U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-WI, introduced legislation that would reactivate the Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT) Act. Baldwin’s bill would authorize a billion dollars a year to fund the use of technology for learning. Money would be available to help districts acquire “digital tools, devices and content” and support the work of technology coordinators in gaining “the skills and knowledge” they need to manage digital learning programs.

Now, EETT may never become a law, but it’s heartening to see a federal legislator act on the need to earmark funding specifically for educational technology. Without this targeted spending, schools and districts will continue to invest precious time and money writing grants, managing crowdsourcing campaigns and having bake sales in a never-ending effort to cobble together enough money to provide their students with the basic equipment of 21st century learning. I, for one, would love to live in a world where educators spent less time raising money and more time teaching kids. (But since this world hasn’t arrived yet, check out our cover story on page 12 for some nuts-and-bolts tips on how to win ed tech grants.)

Baldwin is not the only federal leader whose actions could help schools navigate a changing technological landscape. In a recent editorial on Wired, FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler said that broadband networks should be regulated as a public utility — an important recognition that Internet access is now as fundamental to American life as electricity — certainly for schools, a decent broadband connection has become an absolute necessity.

But connectivity isn’t enough. The Internet is merely a river of information. In order to drink from it, each student needs his or her own cup. Connectivity is an absolute necessity, but it isn’t enough. The Internet is merely a river of information. In order to drink from it, each student needs his or her own cup. With a combination of EETT funding and thoughtfully managed BYOD environments, universal 1-to-1 should be an achievable goal.

To continue the conversation, e-mail me at cpiehler@1105media.com.
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1PBS Learning Media Survey, pbs.org, Feb. 2013
2Pew Internet, How Teachers Are Using Technology at Home and in Their Classrooms, pewinternet.org, 2013
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What the New E-Rate Means to You

An FCC adviser explains what districts should expect from a modernized application process and updated funding priorities.

Chas Eberle is an attorney adviser in the Telecommunications Access Policy Division of the FCC’s Wireline Competition Bureau, where he works on modernization of the E-rate program. THE Journal asked him to share some practical tips for districts tackling their new E-rate applications.

THE Journal: How will the new E-rate application process differ from the old one?

Chas Eberle: The E-rate Modernization Order took several steps to simplify the E-rate application process for funding year 2015 (FY2015). The overall process remains the same, though there are some significant changes to the forms. First, the FCC Form 470, which is used to seek competitive bids for E-rate supported services, and the FCC Form 471 must be submitted electronically. Over the next two funding years, all E-rate forms will transition to be electronic-only forms. Applicants and service providers can find all forms and instructions on the website of the Universal Service Administrative Company website. USAC administers the E-rate program for the FCC.

Applicants must seek competitive bids for E-rate supported services by posting an FCC Form 470. There are a few changes to the FCC Form 470, which reflect changes the FCC made to the E-rate program. For example, the FCC now allows applicants to receive support for “Managed Internal Broadband Services,” which is reflected in the FCC Form 470 as an internal connections service type.

From a process perspective, applicants still must wait at least 28 days from the time their FCC Form 470 is posted before selecting a service provider and must use price as the primary factor in selecting the winning bid.

The online FCC Form 471 has many new features intended to make the form more user-friendly and to save time. Schools that are part of a school district must now calculate their discounts on a districtwide basis. Form 471 Block Four also includes a tool for calculating each school or library’s five-year category two budget. Item 21 is now embedded in the Form 471, and applicants may no longer file separate Item 21 attachments.

THE Journal: Are there any specific services that E-rate might fund that were not funded before?

Eberle: As mentioned above, the E-rate Modernization Order added Managed Internal Broadband Service (managed WiFi) and caching functionality to the E-rate program’s Eligible Services List (ESL). These services are consistent with the FCC’s goal of ensuring that schools have affordable access to high-speed broadband sufficient to support digital learning.

Though the FCC is not currently considering adding or removing other services, the FCC revises the ESL annually. As part of that process, we release a Public Notice with a draft ESL and seek comment. Anyone interested in advocating for funding for additional services should review the draft ESL — typically released in the fall — and file comments.

It’s also important to note that the E-rate Modernization Order focused on expanding funding for WiFi in schools and libraries. Though internal connections and basic maintenance of internal connections had been eligible for E-rate discounts, there was no funding available...
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for what were previously called “priority two” services in FY2013 and FY2014. The Commission has now set a $1 billion annual target for internal connections funding (now designated as “category two”) and established a five-year, $150 (pre-discount) per-student budget for category two services. These steps are designed to provide more predictable and equitable funding for WiFi networks.

If an applicant’s discount rate changes between funding years, the applicant’s reduced voice services discount will be based on the applicant’s discount rate for the current year. Once the phaseout is complete, there will no longer be E-rate support for any voice services.

**THE Journal: What kinds of recommendations is the FCC making to schools in terms of migrating their voice services?**

Eberle: The Commission does not recommend specific services or vendors. Schools are encouraged to consider all responses to the Form 470 in a technologically neutral manner and select the most cost-effective bid.

**THE Journal: Can you explain how the phaseout of voice services will work and what the net effect will be for schools that fund their voice services primarily through E-rate?**

Eberle: Discount rates for voice services will be reduced by 20 percentage points every year beginning in FY2015, until support is completely phased out in FY2019.

For example, a school district with an 80 percent category one discount rate will receive a 60 percent discount on voice services in FY2015, 40 percent in FY2016, 20 percent in FY2017, and no discount beginning in FY2018.

**THE Journal: What are some resources you can suggest to help districts make decisions about their E-rate priorities?**

Eberle: The USAC Schools and Libraries Division website has many tools that can assist districts with every step in the E-rate process.

The E-rate Modernization Order took several steps to improve cost-effective purchasing in the E-rate program. Increased pricing transparency will give schools more information and allow them to make informed purchasing decisions. USAC will make pricing information from Form 471, Block 5, Item 21 publicly available on its website.

Though technology plans are no longer required to receive E-rate discounts, we strongly encourage all schools to review their existing technology plans in light of the program changes in the E-rate Modernization Order.

**THE Journal: What network evaluations should districts do to make sure they are getting the most out of the new E-rate?**

Eberle: That’s a good question. Later this year we are hoping to start some public discussions about best practices for school districts and libraries when it comes to network purchases. Because E-rate pricing will now be publicly available, schools and libraries will now be able to see what their cohorts across the country are purchasing and how much they are paying.

**THE Journal: What application deadlines do districts need to know about?**

Eberle: Applicants must have posted all Form 471s no later than Feb. 26, 2015, though we strongly encouraged applicants to post their Form 470 early to allow ample time for bid evaluation, entering into a contract with a service provider and completing an E-rate application. The Form 471 application-filing window for FY 2015 opened on Jan. 14, 2015, and will close at 11:59 p.m. EDT on Thursday, March 26, 2015. Again, we very strongly encourage applicants not to wait until the last minute to file their applications for E-rate support.
Dysart Unified School District (AZ) recently completed a long-term project to make all of the schools in the entire 140-square-mile system capable of sustaining wireless inside and out. According to CIO John Andrews, that process began in 2010 when the district was able to apply E-rate funds to infrastructure upgrades at five schools. He has used bandwidth guidance from SETDA as a jumping-off point in E-rate applications to help determine how much to request and “how much is enough.”

The external connection at Dysart has grown from 400 Mbps to 4 Gbps over the years, and is on track to be 10 Gbps in its next expansion. Only when that next iteration is in place will the district, with 26,000 students, actually meet the current SETDA target. In the meantime, the WAN doesn’t come close. With an average school size of 1,130 students, SETDA would recommend at least 1 Gbps for each school. And that’s the goal that Dysart’s IT department has set: to upgrade every single internal connection to a gig. But right now, the reality is that some schools within Dysart have 400 Mbps connections and others have 100 Mbps.

Is that sufficient? Andrews has found that every network-related improvement results in increased technology use in the classrooms. And despite the gap between the recommendations and real life, the network is just dandy. In fact, a recent “stress test,” in which users attempted to bring the network down by simultaneously streaming video from TeacherTube and YouTube for Education, showed that, as Andrews reported, schools with internal connections of at least 400 Mbps experienced “zero issues with connectivity,” and schools with 100 Mbps connections had “some slowness once they surpassed 400 devices online.”

The results of the stress test don’t concern Andrews much because he knows that the online assessments students are taking this spring won’t be media-heavy. “We wanted to use ... this test to identify the limits of our current infrastructure,” he said. “We are pretty confident
that we will be able to address all the network needs for our upcoming online ... tests.”

That said, network upgrades will continue apace. The holdup is money — or, rather, lack of it. “We are not a high ‘free-and-reduced’ district,” Andrews noted. Because E-rate will now distribute funds based on the district’s overall free-and-reduced lunch count instead of by school, he hopes to parlay the district’s next E-rate windfall into an upgrade for those internal connections and a refresh of network equipment including switches and UPSes that are now covered as eligible Category Two services.

Upgrade as Needed

St. Lucie Public Schools (FL), with 40,000 students, has been spreading its broadband connectivity just about every year for as long as wireless has been in place, said David Jasa, Information Technology Services Program Manager. He expects that growth to continue. Like Dysart, however, St. Lucie hasn’t reached SETDA’s recommendations. “It’s not that we’re behind;” Jasa explained. “We have a network that supports us for today, and it’s working and it’s fine.”

But possibly not for long. By law, Florida districts must devote at least half of their budget to broadband, Jasa said. “So we put an RFP out this year for our WAN, for example. In that we specifically state, ‘You need to provide us with 10 gig speed,’ so that we’re not having to stop at the time of needing it and we don’t have a contract or a price point that we can rely on. We’re doing these things now to prepare.”

The upgrade will require replacing 15-year-old fiber between the district and its schools to take advantage of the higher-speed switches it’s also going to need. “When you have fiber that old, the design specifications weren’t to the level that would support 10 Gbps, so in some cases we’re having to replace fiber at the school level.”

“What we have today serves today,” Jasa acknowledged, adding, “We don’t believe it will serve tomorrow.”

Moore’s Law Applies to Broadband Capacity, Too

Calling St. Lucie’s broadband aspirations a “moving target,” Jasa relies on specifications from various “trusted organizations” to guide the district’s goals. In particular, he uses CoSN’s Smart Education Networks by Design (SEND), which actually references the SETDA broadband benchmarks.

As SEND Project Director Marie Bjerede, who was also a reviewer of the SETDA report, observed, the numbers “sounded outrageous to people back then.” Yet, she added, even the highest recommendations from SETDA are an order of magnitude less than what most of us have per user in our homes.

The saving grace for schools, Bjerede pointed out, is that “not everybody will be doing the same thing at the same time.” So, she explained, if the guidance from SETDA and CoSN suggests 10 Gbps, which could be “very, very expensive,” you could probably get away with half of that, because, for example, “While one class is using iPads for reading, another class might be using them to watch a video.”

In general, Bjerede said, a variation of Moore’s law applies to broadband capacity. “When you look at the aggregate numbers,” she said, “it’s 60 percent year-over-year growth.” This means that districts should assume that “capacity demand is going to double every 18 months.”

The best way to plan and build capacity for your own district, advised Bjerede, is to “observe for yourself how capacity is affected by different kinds of usage.”

So how fast is fast enough? For Dysart’s Andrews, the answer is easy: “If I don’t get any calls every day from my users that they can’t order the speeds it wants when the time comes. “The contracts we had before didn’t even have 10 Gbps connections in them,” Jasa said. “So we put an RFP out this year for our WAN, for example. In that we specifically state, ‘You need to provide us with 10 gig speed,’ so that we’re not having to stop at the time of needing it and we don’t have a contract or a price point that we can rely on. We’re doing these things now to prepare.”

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So how fast is fast enough? For Dysart’s Andrews, the answer is easy: “If I don’t get any calls every day from my users that they cannot connect to the Internet, I’m okay. That’s fast enough.”

Dian Schaffhauser is a senior contributing editor based in Nevada City, CA.
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In the fierce competition for funding, here’s how you can make your application rise to the top.

BY JOHN K. WATERS
IN THIS ERA OF LIMITED BUDGETS, K-12 educators looking to add technology to their classrooms often have to find creative ways to pay for their projects. Fortunately, there has never been a wider range of ed tech funding sources. Joining the lineup of traditional federal, state and private foundation grants is a new generation of donor programs and contests. “Writing a grant” today can mean anything from stating your case in a Word document to producing a video or making a direct pitch on a website. Whatever the medium, it’s how you tell your story that sets you apart from the competition. Whether you’re writing a traditional grant, entering a contest or reaching out online to a potential benefactor, you’ll increase your chances of success by applying these seven strategies.
Start With Your Need
Because they can get funding for telecom and infrastructure through E-rate, educators write ed tech grants primarily for end-user equipment. So you might be tempted to start your grant proposal talking about the tech, but that would be a mistake, said Alice E. Owen, executive director of the Texas K-12 CTO Council, the state chapter of CoSN that supports school district chief technology officers. Always begin your story, Owen said, with your need. “Look at your community,” she said. “Maybe there’s a high rate of poverty in your district and the kids are not achieving. Maybe you have a large number of non-English-speaking students who are not doing well. You can get together with your colleagues and brainstorm a list, and then pick one that you feel very attached to. That’s where you focus first.”

Owen, a sometime trainer, is a former principal, staff development director and technology director. More importantly, she’s a savvy veteran of the grant-writing wars. During her time as executive director of technology at Irving Independent School District (TX), she led grant projects that secured $3 million to $4 million for her district.

Once you’ve identified your community’s need, Owen said, make a list of the barriers this problem creates for your students. Then explain how the technology you’re asking for will help them to overcome those barriers.

“It’s truly in your best interest to make this need you’ve identified seem very dire and very sad,” she said. “You are competing for this money; so your need has to seem greater than someone else’s. You want it to be clearly understood that, if you don’t get this help, your kids are going to continue to do worse, and not achieve.”

Keep the Students Front and Center
Always remember: You don’t need this technology; your students do. Talk about their problems. Maybe you have kids in your district who reach high school and then have no clue what they want to do when they graduate. Maybe you have a high dropout rate, or graduates who are floundering. Maybe your ninth-graders desperately need support to improve their algebra scores. According to Owen, “You can always find a need and way to tie it to the progress of students’ current performance or future careers, but the technology always comes in as a support resource, not as the main objective of the grant.” In short, put your students first in your narrative and keep the focus on them.

Students were literally in the spotlight for the Compass Learning Classroom Refresh Contest. The applications for this grant took the form of student-and-teacher-produced music videos that aimed to demonstrate how technology could enhance classroom instruction. Grants of $185,000 worth of personalized learning software, hardware and professional development packages from Compass Learning and other vendors were awarded to classrooms in grades K-5, 6 to 8, and 9 to 12.

Eileen Shihadeh, vice president at Compass Learning, said, “We were looking for folks who were very motivated. The fact that they were willing to put the sweat equity into making these videos was strong evidence of the buy-in, both of the students and the teachers, which we felt was essential. But to be honest, it was always the students who sold it.”

It’s not all about sad-eyed kids asking for help, though. Shihadeh counseled, “You really want to think about what your vision is for how technology can enhance your teaching and learning. Get that vision focused, and then express it in the video. Really put your heart into it. The combination of those two things — a thoughtful vision about what you’re trying to achieve (and what you believe technology will help you achieve) with a heartfelt appeal — is a recipe for success.”

Don’t Go It Alone
One way to make your application more appealing is to partner with other organizations: other school districts, a local university, a public library or a local business. Also consider a local community college or private charities that work...
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in your community. This team approach is especially useful if you are trying for a large federal grant, Owen said. “The federal government likes to see partnerships. There can be a lot of money at stake, so they’re definitely looking for a broader coalition in a community. This is a key to winning federal grants.”

“Look around your community for anyone who might help,” she added, “keeping in mind that their part in the grant project doesn’t need to be very big. Maybe they’re just lending the project their name or their expertise, or they’re just there to help disseminate the information after the project is over.”

Smaller districts interested in federal grants almost certainly have to partner with larger districts. But they don’t have to come to the project hat in hand. Not only do they add to the overall number of coalition members, which plays to the feds’ preference, they’re often needier than the larger districts, which makes the overall package more appealing. To put it bluntly, Owen said, “If you’re a wealthier school district, there are definite advantages to partnering with a smaller district with greater needs.”

Chose a Memorable Name and Graphic

When you reach out for classroom technology grants, you’re not selling laundry detergent or breakfast cereal, but you are selling, and you have a great chance of making a sale when the product has a compelling brand. Owen advised, “Naming your project provides a hook and a quick way for people to understand what it’s all about.” And, she added, “If you can marry that name with something visual, even better.”

One example Owen pointed to is the STAR Project, which she helmed during her time at Irving ISD. First implemented in 1995, STAR’s objective was to get veteran teachers to use technology to benefit students, and then to mentor new teachers to use it. The project connected students, teachers and parents with staff development. The visual element, not surprisingly, was a star, each point of which represented one of the stakeholder groups who were there to support the students. “We felt that the graphic helped to present a good visual that kind of boiled down what the project was all about,” Owen said. “I think it worked, because we won that grant and several more.”

If you’re working on an atypical grant application — say, a video — this kind of aesthetic consideration becomes even more important. When judging the Classroom Refresh contestants, Shihadeh said, “The overall quality of the videos was definitely something we looked for. The technology for producing video is so accessible now to students that it really shouldn’t be a problem.”

Just like in the classroom, though, the tech itself is less important than how it is used. Shihadeh emphasized “the creativity and spirit of the students and teachers, and the way they expressed how this technology would enrich the classroom and enhance personalized learning.”

Start Small to Win Big

As the saying goes, nothing succeeds like success. The people and organizations that provide ed tech grants want to know that their money will be well spent. Providing them with evidence that the grants you have won in the past were effective is a powerful argument for giving you another one.

Todd E. Keruskin, assistant superintendent at the Elizabeth Forward School District in rural Pennsylvania, uses an “all of the above” strategy when it comes to winning funding for his district. “We go after every single grant,” he said. “If it’s a $1,000 grant, nine times out of 10, we’re going to go after it. In fact, we just got another grant last week from an organization in Pittsburgh for $1,000, and we’re going to use it to reach out and open our [fabrication] lab to our community free of charge. People see that we have success with these
little grants and they’re more likely to give us a bigger one.”

If it doesn’t seem worth it to spend your time and energy writing a grant for a couple of thousand bucks, Owen added, you should think of such a project as a starter grant that lets you flesh out your idea. From there, you can think bigger. Irving’s STAR Project, for example, began as a $1,500 grant. A year later, Owen used the same concept to apply for a state grant and won $250,000.

To build your reputation as a worthy grantee, you need to provide an evaluation of your project. Any large grant will probably require it, but it’s in your best interest to plan for an evaluation of even a small project, Keruskin suggested. “It can be something as simple as a pre-survey/post-survey,” he said, “but you need to show that you did what you said you were going to do and that you had a positive impact. That’s critical to getting the next grant.”

Keruskin helped Elizabeth Forward win hundreds of thousands of dollars in educational technology grants over a three-year period during which the district transformed the high school and middle school into cutting-edge learning centers and began offering computer programming classes at the elementary level. His personal tip for success: Once you’ve completed the project, don’t forget to follow up with the funders. The district has posted at least half a dozen videos on YouTube, but Keruskin goes beyond that.

“We have kindergarten kids 3D printing,” he said. “We send pictures of that to the funders out there. We invite them to the grand openings. We send them data, even if they don’t require us to. The people who are funding and giving away their money want to see that it was worth it. We make sure they do.”

**Learn From Previous Winners**

While you definitely want your application to stand out, you don’t need to reinvent the wheel. Once a grant is awarded, it goes into the public records. Consequently, you should be able to find plenty of examples of funded grants in nearly every form online. (For example, you can watch the winning videos from the Classroom Refresh contest on YouTube.) Look at what successful applicants have done, and use their strategies or ideas to help you present your own ideas.

Another way to get a broad perspective on what other districts are doing is to volunteer to read grants. Granting institutions often want two or three set of eyes on the applications they consider. Readers rank them based on a rubric the institutions provide, and the grantors then weigh the scores from the different readers as they consider which proposals to approve. Often, especially at the state level, granting institutions ask for volunteer readers from the district.

“One way to help is to read a lot of grants,” Owen said. “It’s a great way to learn how to write them. You have to evaluate them and score them, so you have to read them closely. You can’t help but pick up a lot.”

**Hire a Grant Writer**

It may seem counterintuitive to advise budget-strapped districts to invest in a professional grant writer, but tackling hundreds of pages of paperwork for a large project can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. To get a leg up in the fierce competition for ed tech dollars, Owen said, “Districts hire professional grant writers because, in the long run, they’re worth it. They do the research, compile the relevant data and shape the grant application into a competitive document.”

According to Owen, adding a writer to your staff is an investment that can pay enormous dividends. “I’m not exaggerating when I say that they can earn their salary 10 times over,” she said.

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**John K. Waters** is a freelance journalist and author based in Mountain View, CA.
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5 Tech Tools That Support Common Core

With online assessments around the corner, we look at the hardware and software that districts are using to teach to the new standards.

According to the 4th Annual Principals’ Assessment of Public Education, 95.7 percent of schools in states that have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have implemented or are in the process of implementing the standards. Many of those schools are also getting ready to administer the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium assessments for the first time. To get a sense of what is working in districts around the country, we asked educators to share the technology tools that they are using to help implement CCSS and prepare students for the upcoming assessments.

Preparing Special Ed Students for CCSS

The Common Core standards emphasize an inquiry-based approach to learning, encouraging students to ask questions and persevere through challenges. According to Christine Fax-Huckaby, a special education academic support teacher in Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD) in Chula Vista, CA, that inquiry-based approach can be difficult for special education teachers because “we don’t want our kids to struggle. We don’t want to lose them.”

In an effort to help special education students in SUHSD succeed, the district has deployed a tool called Learning Upgrade, an online math and English language arts curriculum that uses songs, video and games to engage students. According to Fax-Huckaby, Learning Upgrade uses an inquiry-based approach to provide differentiated instruction to help special education students fill in gaps in their learning.

Fax-Huckaby focuses on universal design for learning in her training for special and general educators. UDL suggests that teachers provide multiple means of representation, expression and engagement to facilitate learning. “And I think so many of those things involve technology and inquiry,” she said. According to Fax-Huckaby, Learning Upgrade uses the technology that kids love to motivate them. It lets them continue working on a concept until they’ve mastered it, and she said the district’s assessment data shows that special education students are doing better as a result.

Addressing Close Reading

The Common Core requires students to read deeply and extract meaning from complex texts in subjects such as science and social studies. To support close reading skills, teachers at C.T. Sewell Elementary School in Henderson, NV, are using myON and Accelerated Reader.

MyON is an interactive, digital library of more than 4,000 books for K-12 that integrates with Accelerated Reader, an online assessment tool for reading comprehension. Holli Ratliff, principal of C.T. Sewell Elementary, said, “Students can read the books on myON, and then can link directly to Accelerated Reader to take their comprehension quiz to measure their understanding of what they just read.”

The school chose myON because it has such a large collection of nonfiction books to support close reading across subject areas. Elizabeth Stuflick, an instructional coach at the school, said teachers select texts that are about one grade level above the class they are teaching. The texts are also related to science or social studies units, so students are deepening their knowledge in those subject areas.

In the primary grades, students can wear headphones and listen to the stories read aloud, and they can then be assessed on their listening comprehension. “They’re hearing good reading modeled for them, and then we’re building that print-to-speech...
Managing Small Group Instruction

The Common Core standards expect students to demonstrate effective speaking and listening skills in 1-on-1, small-group and whole-class discussions. Ashleigh Schulz, a gifted teacher at Calcasieu Parish Public Schools in Lake Charles, LA, uses an audio system called Flexcat to monitor and support students during group work.

Schulz describes Flexcat as a management and monitoring system for group instruction. The system supports up to six communication “pods.” Each group of students has its own pod. Wearing a microphone, earpiece and remote control, Schulz can move freely around the classroom to monitor the groups.

“When my students are outside of the classroom, I can communicate with them, and it’s a two-way communication,” said Schulz. “If they’re in the classroom, under the tables or outside in the hallway working — even across the hall in another classroom — they can take these mobile pods and I can hear everything that’s going on. I can allow them to know that I’m there by jumping in to their conversation, or I can just sit back and listen. It gives me such insight into their learning, and helps me as a teacher know where to go next.”

Schulz has found that the system helps keeps students on task when working in small groups because they know she may be listening in at any time. “It’s really awesome to hear and just step back and listen to the way that their brains work, because in the past, as I would walk up to a group, they would shut down,” said Schulz. “And that doesn’t happen now.”

Embedding Assessments to Support CCSS Mastery

Phoenixville Area School District (PA) is using a curriculum tool called Defined STEM, which embeds assessments within the curriculum and asks students to complete multi-disciplinary projects to demonstrate mastery of standards. Preston McKnight, K-12 supervisor of curriculum for the district, said, “The beautiful thing about Defined STEM is that it’s aligned to national standards on multiple levels. The language arts and science pieces are all in play.”

Defined STEM projects include, for example, designing a backpack or manufacturing sunglasses. The backpack project guides students through a series of activities that span multiple lessons, from understanding the elements of design and the necessary math calculations, to drawing their own backpack design, to actually creating the backpack.

“That’s the assessment — the backpack is done,” said McKnight. The sunglasses manufacturing project requires launching a PR campaign to market the product, so the students can practice and get assessed on standards across disciplines.

The tool also offers multiple paths through the projects, so each project can be customized so that students with learning challenges through to more advanced learners can all complete the project. The different levels built into each project are all aligned with Common Core standards.

Conducting Formative Assessments

To monitor student progress and adjust lesson plans accordingly, Clear Lake Middle School (IA) is using three formative assessment tools: Skills Iowa, My Access and Naiku. Educators use Skills Iowa to assess math and reading. My Access to assess writing and Naiku to gauge students’ progress in multiple subject areas.

In Naiku, each question can be linked to a specific standard to help teachers assess student progress. The tool integrates with the school’s Infinite Campus learning management system, so when a teacher gives an assessment in Naiku, the students’ scores are logged in the LMS’s gradebook.

According to Steve Kwikkel, principal at Clear Lake, some of the teachers use Naiku’s “exit tag” feature almost daily. An exit tag is a quick check for understanding at the end of a lesson to see if the students met the learning target for that day. “It gives teachers real data right now,” he said, so they can use that information to develop and refine their lesson plans.

Using the data from Skills Iowa, My Access and Naiku to assess student progress and develop quality lessons and units linked to the Common Core makes it unnecessary to teach to the CCSS tests, Kwikkel concluded. “You really don’t have to tell the kid, ‘This is the Common Core standard that we’re working on,’ because they’re operating from that already.”

Leila Meyer is a freelance writer based in British Columbia, Canada.

Online Assessment Infrastructure Checklist

To help you prepare to give Web-based tests this spring, here’s a quick review of the minimum technology requirements for PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments, as provided by the State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA).

- Internet speed (per student): 50 kbps (PARCC); 20 kbps (Smarter Balanced)
- School network speed (per student): 1 Gbps (PARCC); 20 kbps (Smarter Balanced)
- Computers:
  - Windows: Windows XP SP3 (PARCC and Smarter Balanced) with 512 MB RAM (PARCC) or 128 MB RAM (Smarter Balanced)
  - Mac: Mac OS X 10.6 with 1 GB RAM (PARCC); Mac OS X 10.4.4 with 256 MB RAM (Smarter Balanced)
- Chrome OS: version 33 (PARCC); version 31 (Smarter Balanced)
- Tablets
  - Apple iOS: iPad 2 with iOS 6
  - Android: Android 4.0 (Smarter Balanced)
  - Windows: Windows 8
- External keyboard, pointing device and headphones
- 9.5-inch or larger screen with 1,024 x 768 resolution

You can see a complete list of technology recommendations on SETDA’s online Guide to Technology Requirements.
Alachua County serves more than 29,000 students, and while Wern doesn’t know how many of these have a learning disability in particular, about 14 percent of the district’s population — or more than 4,000 students — are entitled to some kind of support under an IEP. That’s a significant number.

But if any of these students go on to college, the chances are high that the supports they had in high school won’t exist for them in higher education. A national longitudinal study from the United States Department of Education found that 87 percent of students with learning disabilities received some kind of support at the

Helping Students With Learning Disabilities Transition to College

Although assistive technologies and other supports can help, too few students who need them take advantage once they leave high school. Here’s what K-12 schools can do to help.

As an occupational therapist and assistive technology specialist for Florida’s Alachua County Public Schools, Elisa Wern works every day with students who have learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia or a lack of executive functioning. Assistive technology “plays a critical role” in these students’ success, Wern said. Students with a documented learning disability are eligible for a variety of supports and services, and Wern collaborates with each student’s individualized education program (IEP) team to identify the accommodations he or she needs to be successful. These can range from adaptive papers and portable word processors to operating system accessibility features, word-prediction software and screen reader technology.

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But if any of these students go on to college, the chances are high that the supports they had in high school won’t exist for them in higher education. A national longitudinal study from the United States Department of Education found that 87 percent of students with learning disabilities received some kind of support at the
K-12 level, but when these students moved on to college, only 19 percent continued to get support.

Sam Johnston, a research scientist for CAST, a nonprofit organization that works to expand learning opportunities for all students, said, “It’s shocking to see such a huge change” from high school to college. “These are the same students, but for whatever reason, they’re not being served in higher education.”

Students who have learning disabilities often face steep challenges in making the jump from high school to higher ed, and these challenges go well beyond the shift to more intensive, college-level work. According to Tracy Gray, managing researcher for education at the American Institutes for Research, transitioning students with learning disabilities from high school to college “is a very important issue, and it often gets overlooked.”

While assistive technologies can help with this transition, Johnston, Gray and other disability specialists warned that too few college-level students are taking advantage of these tools. There are a number of reasons for this, but they said that K-12 schools can play a critical role in preparing students with learning disabilities for a successful transition to college and beyond.

‘A Bit of the Wild West’

Although many students arrive at college after having had an IEP in high school, “the process is very different for getting services in K-12 compared with higher education.” Johnston said. At the K-12 level, the onus for identifying learning disabilities and providing the right kinds of support is on the school or district. Johnston said. When students move on to college, the responsibility shifts over to them and, she added, “it often falls apart somewhere along the line.”

As students get older, “they don’t necessarily want people to know they have a disability,” Gray said. “They don’t want to be singled out.” As a result, many college students choose not to self-identify as having a learning disability.

This problem is made worse by the fact that many college students do not live at home and therefore no longer have their parents advocating for their education. What’s more, the scope of services that colleges and universities offer to students with learning disabilities varies widely. While the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 requires colleges to support students with learning disabilities, colleges differ in terms of the resources they have devoted to this challenge.

Describing colleges’ focus on the issue, Gray said, “It’s still a bit of the Wild West out there. Some colleges and universities have been more responsive to the needs of students with disabilities, but we hear from many students that the kinds of supports they had in the K-12 system just aren’t there.”

**What K-12 Schools Can Do**

Gray urges high school guidance counselors to know which colleges and universities are most responsive to the needs of students with learning disabilities — and which are not. Directing students with learning disabilities to a campus where there is not as much awareness on the issue “doesn’t really make a lot of sense,” she said.

Wern said he believes K-12 schools can help students with learning disabilities prepare for college success by teaching them to be 21st century learners. “Today’s students are digital natives, and we need to teach them with technology,” she said. “This is true for all students, but particularly true for students with disabilities.”

Incorporating technology across the curriculum and helping students identify the right tool for the task is a large part of helping them succeed after they leave the K-12 environment.”

Alachua County schools provide a variety of assistive technologies for students with learning disabilities. These include text-to-speech software, such as Kurzweil 3000-firefly, to help students understand printed content, as well as word-prediction software, such as Co:Writer, to help them communicate their ideas in writing.

Wern said, “We have really zeroed in on the students’ and their needs by looking first at what tasks they are being asked to complete and the nature of their struggles.

**According to researcher Tracy Gray, as students get older, “they don’t necessarily want people to know they have a disability.”**

Giving students a set of tools, she explained, isn’t a solution unless each student knows why he or she needs each tool. “This could mean to say, ‘I use Kurzweil software to access my textbook and take notes, and here’s what I need to do that.’ Or to say, ‘I need to take my test in the disability resource center,’ or ‘I need a peer note taker.’ ”

While these tools are certainly important, Wern said that the most important thing educators can do to help students with learning disabilities transition to college “isn’t giving them technology, but empowering them to be advocates for themselves. It’s critically important, and needs to start early.”

**Dennis Pierce** is a freelance writer with 17 years of experience covering education and technology. He can be reached at denniswpierce@gmail.com.
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Andrew P. Marcinek

A Class Full of Geniuses

For many districts, having students do tech support as part of their classwork has helped create a culture of trust and innovation.

In the summer of 2011, I was handed an opportunity to design and teach a course loosely based on Apple’s in-store Genius Bar. The driving force behind this course was the impending launch of our 1-to-1 iPad environment. That summer, the Burlington Public Schools (MA) tech team was preparing to deliver iPads to every student in the high school. We were a five-person team, and three of those positions covered every school and device in the district. We were taking on these additional devices without additional support.

The key in all of our 1-to-1 planning was developing a way to integrate tier one support on a daily basis. We knew there would be a demand for consistent support from both students and teachers. We also knew that our standard ticketing system would get backlogged very quickly — not to mention that we would still have to attend to other tickets districtwide.

The solution was to create a student Help Desk as part of a graded, half-year elective. Students could opt to take the course, called Student Technology Integration, twice. The course description was the following: “The Student Technology Integration course is a hands-on study of technology integration in an educational context. Students will be required to assess problem sets throughout the day and define the best approach to addressing or solving the problem. In addition to solving problems for students and teachers, students will be required to complete and maintain several running projects that address problems or solutions in educational technology integration. The course also asks students to have a prior understanding of Apple OS, Microsoft Windows OS, Chrome OS and iOS. This course seeks students who are self-motivated learners and use inquiry to drive their exploration and experiments in order to reach greater discovery. It is the one course where failing is an option on occasion.”

Looking for Troubleshooters

Initially, we opened the course to any student who wanted to sign up for it, but then we implemented an interview process. Students could sign up for the course, but had to go through a formal interview process and participate in a battery of tests that assessed their awareness when troubleshooting a problem on the spot. We didn’t seek out the most tech-savvy students: We wanted students who could easily grasp the idea of self-directed learning, were well-organized and could maintain composure in an interrupted learning environment.

During the first few weeks that the course was operating, we had significant traffic coming down for support. Many of the issues had to do with tier one support issues like a
Some schools even wrote to us saying that they were using our student tutorials in their faculty professional development. I’d say that’s a pretty authentic, purposeful learning experience.

Forgotten password or WiFi issues. Eventually, this traffic subsided and the course needed a new direction. I developed a course outline that was deliberately novel. I wanted the students to be engaged in the course and working on both individual passion projects and collaborative research projects. In short, I asked students to serve as a Genius at the Genius Bar, a journalist for Mashable and a TED talk presenter.

Students also started developing resources for our staff. They would look at the applications we were using and break them down into video training modules and scripts. Many students used AirServer to mirror their iPad on to a Mac and then used Snagit to produce a screencast of their application. They created storyboards for each segment and then posted to the help desk blog, which had a global following. Some schools even wrote to us saying that they were using our student tutorials in their faculty professional development. I’d say that’s a pretty authentic, purposeful learning experience.

Spreading the Word

I wanted the original course outline to be simple so that other districts could take it and remix it and make it their own. When I eventually handed the course off to Jenn Scheffter at Burlington, I told her to adhere to the founding philosophy and principles of the course, but to make it her own. And, since 2011, I have shared this course outline with many schools and districts around the world in hopes that there is a student help desk course in every school in the world. A lofty goal, but this course is very important to me, and equally important to schools that desire to launch a movement around student-driven technology courses. Every day as students walk away each day thinking that they did.

The exciting part for me is to see what the students ultimately contribute to their schools and communities. It’s gratifying to be on the forefront of designing such a course, but the real excitement is seeing how many schools have leveraged the creative genius of their students.

Innovation Begins With Trust

When I began my new role as director of technology for Grafton Public Schools (MA), I was elated to hear that the high school was using my student Genius Bar model. I have had several opportunities to speak with students and work with them throughout the course of this school year, and what I see are students eager to solve problems and help their school community. I also see engaged, active learners seeking out answers and asking all the right questions.

We recently opened up our ticketing system to our Tech Force students so that they can help address logged help tickets at both our high school and middle school (which are on the same campus). Within a few days, I received this e-mail from our middle school principal: “In the past 24 hours since Tech Force has been able to come over, they have addressed issues quicker than ever! The students have been cordial and courteous when trying to help. Job well done!”

When schools I consult with ask why they should consider offering this course, I don’t really elaborate too much, deferring instead to the students. Designing this course was never about me getting credit for it or about the technology, but rather about giving students a place that allowed them to be active participants in their learning and make a difference in their school communities. This is a course I would have signed up for immediately when I was in high school.

It’s driven by inquiry and curiosity, and it yields creative, innovative experiences and outcomes that align with many of our Common Core standards (and those standards not so common).

Ultimately, this course was part of a broader initiative to create a shared culture of learning and trust. Innovation in schools begins with trust. School leaders must embrace this concept if they want their technology initiatives to thrive for years to come. One of the biggest mistakes a school leader or district technology director can make is to think that they can honestly control every aspect of a student’s digital life. It’s an impossible task. Instead of working within a culture of restrictions and redactions, school leaders should develop and design paradigms that empower students to use technology.

This is not to say that district leaders should be cavalier with filtering and privacy policies. We should all put forth our best efforts to close off the dark corners of the Web and ensure student privacy, but students and teachers should be trusted to work in a culture of openness and have access to resources that will empower, educate and amplify students’ voices.

I encourage everyone who reads this article to take the philosophy of the student help desk course and design a space custom-
3 Tips to Caffeinate Teacher and Student Presentations

An award-winning teacher and author shares her secrets for transforming slide shows into interactive learning experiences.

In a seminar I attended, media analyst Tad Simons once estimated that 30 million PowerPoint presentations are given every day. Multiply that by an average of 30 people in each presentation, and you are looking at 90 million people a day who are at best in a daze — at worst dying from boredom.

On the education stage, the classic example of the talking-head syndrome is actor Ben Stein as the dorky high school economics teacher in Ferris Bueller’s Day Off. (Watch the clip one more hilarious time on YouTube: “Anyone, anyone....”) A big part of the problem for teachers and presenters in general is that there is a limit to the time humans can just “sit and get” (what deluded teachers have been calling for years “listen and learn”). In his multimedia book Brain Rules, cognitive psychologist and University of Washington professor John Medina records this time limit as 10 minutes.

Yup. Even when listening to someone as entertaining as John Medina, students start tuning out like clockwork as lectures approach the 10-minute mark. Schools are beginning to take this timing to heart, with teachers stopping to give students the opportunity to pair share, answer questions, discuss what they just learned or project what’s coming next. At Grimmer Elementary School in Fremont, CA, after each 10-minute chunk of teacher-driven content, students have two minutes of discussion with a partner. The school calls this “10:2” and teachers observe the practice almost religiously.

Breaks might be used to show illustrative videos. For example, when discussing career options, it might be fun to see how talents manifest at a young age, as in the charming YouTube video of the precocious Casanova shown above.

Teachers and older students alike can also be swept away by the passion of violinist Drew Tretick playing Time to Say Goodbye. As I

I
recently wrote to Drew, not only has he given the world exquisitely beautiful music, but he has also inspired many listeners to “find their own violin.”

Access to videos such as these was the reason I moved from PowerPoint to Keynote. Apple allows me to embed videos in Keynote slideshows. I use at least four to five video clips in an hourlong presentation and love the security of knowing I can plug my Keynote (backed up onto a flash drive) into any Mac’s USB port and all the video clips will play flawlessly. Of course, the fact that Keynote will open existing PowerPoints has made the transition a lot easier!

\section*{Compare and Contrast}

More subtle changes of pace flow out of small group discussion of juxtaposed images. In his classic publication \textit{What Works in Schools}, Robert Marzano ranked “identifying similarities and differences” as the No. 1 strategy for effective teaching and learning. With that knowledge, armed with LCD projectors and overlay writing devices, we can display (and annotate) images side-by-side while small groups of students discuss those similarities and differences. You can access my YouTube video “Teaching the Teacher to Use Visuals and Music” to see groups observing the maple leaf and the daffodil shown above.

Or you can elicit laughter every time as you invite discussion of options for toilet paper orientation.

On a more serious note, teachers can increase interactivity by encouraging small group discussion of before-and-after slides.

For easier comparisons, make sure the images are juxtaposed on the same slide rather than stacked in sequential slides. Let the viewers discover the changes rather than listening to the presenter lecture about them. Use your annotation tools to draw attention to specific points the participants mention.

\section*{The Power of Pictures}

For example, by making a list of everything that changes in the résumé at right, you will create editing points for text-laden slides:

\begin{itemize}
  \item using upper vs. lower case letters;
  \item adding a background;
  \item adding a picture;
  \item color vs. black and white;
  \item left justifying text;
  \item leading, grouping and white space; and
  \item removing superfluous and redundant text.
\end{itemize}

The eye will go to images before it goes to text, to color before black and white. So, think of your full-screen, full-color images as magnets to draw viewers’ attention.

In a way, an image puts viewers on the same page and lets them share a common experience. But I like to remind presenters that images also elicit different prior knowledge and experience for each viewer. A fun activity to make this point experientially (rather than lecturing about it) involves displaying the following full-screen, full-color image and then asking small groups to answer a series of questions:

1) Who are these women? 2) What is their relationship? 3) What is the event? 4) Why are they laughing?

You would be amazed at the range of stories that emerge! After several small groups tell their tales to the whole group, I tell them what was actually occurring in the photo. (You have to come to one of my live sessions to find out, or e-mail me your story and I’ll tell you mine. You can reach me at lynellb@aol.com.)

You can use your own photo and story for this activity. Just make sure there are two people in the photo.

Other photos can serve to introduce topics in the curriculum, like this well-known poster.

\section*{Free Resources}

Dozens (maybe hundreds) more ideas to awaken the somnolent are explained in my latest book, \textit{They Snooze, You Lose: The Educator’s Guide to Successful Presentations}. The book also includes a DVD with full-color images (sized for your slide shows) that are copyright-free for educational use. Publisher Jossey-Bass/Wiley has graciously offered a free evaluation copy for educators considering adopting the book for their courses.

You can also visit YouTube and search for “Lynell Burmark” to access related videos, and go to my website educatebetter.org for articles and additional videos as well as descriptions of presentations that I would be delighted to deliver at your conference or other educational venue.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Lynell Burmark’s teaching experience spans kindergarten through graduate school. Her book Visual Literacy: Learn to See, See to Learn won the book of the year award for publisher ASCD. Her latest book is They Snooze, You Lose: The Educator’s Guide to Successful Presentations.}
\end{center}
**BENQ MX723 PROJECTOR**
BenQ’s new MX723 projector features 1,024 x 768 resolution with 3,700 lumens and a 13,000-to-1 high-contrast ratio. It offers vertical and horizontal keystone correction as well as zoom functionality. With its SmartEco mode, the projector can automatically adjust lamp power by up to 70 percent in brightness, resulting in as much as 5,000 hours of lamp life.

**DUST ONLINE SCIENCE GAME**
DUST, a new online multiplayer game developed by two universities and NASA, aims to help persuade middle and high school students to immerse themselves in science. In the game, players use real-world media and skills to interact with a fictional world where a meteor shower has spread “mysterious clouds of dust into the Earth’s atmosphere,” making adults fall unconscious. The game was developed by students at Brigham Young University, the University of Maryland and engineers from NASA.

**DIGITAL STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL ONENESS PROJECT**
The Global Oneness Project, a curator of multicultural studies, has launched a multimedia initiative that combines free digital stories and lesson plans aligned to the Common Core. The inter-disciplinary stories — in the form of short documentary films, photo essays and articles — examine global themes, and the lesson plans are designed to facilitate critical thinking, reflective writing and in-class activities designed for use in arts, environmental sciences, English and history courses.

**EXTRAN ETHERNET CONTROLLERS**
Extron Electronics has introduced a series of new Ethernet controllers designed to provide security and easy on/off functions, and to handle data delivered to projectors and AV systems via the Internet. The MediaLink Plus 50, 100 and 200 controllers are all fully configurable and feature beveled edges, rounded corners and backlit buttons. All five new models are customizable using Global Configurator Plus or Professional.
Christie has announced the H Series: two 1DLP projectors that boast 12,000 lumens and weigh in at 52.5 pounds. Designed for large auditoriums, the dual-lamp Christie D12HD-H and Christie D12WU-H are about half the size of other devices in their class, according to the company. The Christie H Series will be available in April with a three-year parts and labor warranty.

PEAK SPECIAL ED PLATFORM
PresenceLearning and Fuel Education (FuelEd) have partnered to deliver a live, online solution designed to provide schools and districts with greater access to service providers for K-12 special education students. Using PEAK, FuelEd’s personalized learning platform, therapists can now access PresenceLearning’s Web-based videoconferencing to provide evidence-based therapeutic activities for their special-needs students.

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ACER C910 CHROMEBOOK
Acer’s new C910 Chromebook has a 15.6-inch display designed for environments where the computer needs to be viewed by multiple users. The display comes in two resolutions: 1,920 x 1,080 and 1,366 x 768. The machine weighs less than 5 pounds. The C910 also features reinforced covers and hinges as well as corners that allow the device to tolerate drops of up to 18 inches without damage.

VERNIER STRUCTURES AND MATERIALS TESTER
The Vernier Structures and Materials Tester is designed to help high school students understand key engineering concepts such as load and stress levels. The VSMT has a force sensor that can measure up to 1,000 N, and a displacement sensor that can measure with a precision of 0.1 mm resolution. With these two tools, students can record maximum breaking loads as well as the characteristics of force and stress.

VIDEOCLOUD 365 VIDEOCONFERENCING SERVICE
VideoCentric, a video communications integrator, has launched VideoCloud 365, a new cloud-based videoconferencing service based on the Pexip Infinity virtualized meeting platform. The system supports any professional videoconferencing endpoint, including any standards-based video system, Microsoft Lync, Office 365 clients, Skype, WebRTC clients, desktop software clients, smartphone and tablet applications and Web browsers.

EBSCO ONLINE RESEARCH INTERFACE
EBSCO has launched a new interface for its EBSCOhost online research database, Explora, designed specifically for K-12 schools and public libraries, is based on the results of user studies and comes in multiple versions for students, teachers, librarians and library patrons. All versions are compatible with mobile devices and have a single search box, browsable topic categories arranged by popularity, topic overviews and the ability to limit results by source type.
Kurzweil Education is rolling out Kurzweil 1000 Version 14, the latest version of its text-to-speech software. The technology combines scanning, image-processing and text-to-speech tools to make printed or electronic text accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired. The software also boasts organizational features such as note-taking, bookmarks, content summaries and an appointment calendar with audible reminders. The company is offering a free 30-day trial.

TabPilot has created an ASUS-Enhanced version of its Tablet Manager software. The company is offering the special edition as part of a bundle that sells for $449 and includes the ASUS Transformer Pad TF103C tablet (pictured), a keyboard and protective sleeve. TabPilot features on the ASUS-Enhanced edition include remote, silent app distribution, the ability for teachers to monitor or freeze student screens and the ability to restrict students to a single app.
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In a K-12 district with 173 schools and 110,000 students, former high school principal Ryan Imbriale is leading Students and Teachers Accessing Tomorrow (STAT), a multiyear transformation into what the district calls a “21st century technology learning environment to prepare globally competitive graduates.” The cornerstone of the conversion is a 1-to-1 program that, within five years, will put an HP Revolve notebook/tablet in every student’s hand.

Ryan Imbriale: When we were going through the planning around this, there were lots of conversations about how we take on an initiative like STAT in a way that’s scalable, and in a way that helps us learn from our own stumbles so that we can make sure that we do things better with each iteration. So we did this through a “Lighthouse Schools” program. You can think of the Lighthouse Schools as pilots. We see them as opportunities for reflection, opportunities to document the journeys that are happening in these schools and to really understand what kind of learning environments need to be in place to be successful.

This year we’re in 10 elementary schools. Next year, in addition to rolling out the rest of our elementary schools, we’ll be selecting five middle-school Lighthouse Schools. The following year, as we expand to the rest of the middle schools, we will have high schools as Lighthouse Schools. The concept is that we have this lighthouse the year prior to the rest of the district rolling out, so that we can ensure that those that come after them can benefit from all of the lessons learned, whether it’s infrastructure or instructional practice.

THE Journal: What’s the key to a 1-to-1 rollout in a large district?

Ryan Imbriale: It wasn’t enough for just the principal to express an interest. We chose only schools that had at least 80 percent faculty buy-in, because we believed the demands on being a Lighthouse School were high enough that we wanted to make sure we had both an administration and a faculty who were willing to go down this path together.

THE Journal: Why did you choose to start at the elementary school level?

Imbriale: A few reasons. If we’re starting in first, second and third grade, these students will be with us for multiple years as they progress through elementary school, into middle school and into high school. And so they are going to be the drivers of the changes we’re going to see in our upper elementary grades, in our middle school grades and finally in high school. Also, as we looked at revising curriculum, we wanted to start that work at the elementary level, with our English Language Arts, and we felt that if we were going to be doing this conversion of our curriculum, it also made sense that students at that level would go through the conversion as well. We’re converting all of our curricula to a digital platform called BCPS One, which is an integration of two commercial products (Engrade and Infinite Campus), and so the curriculum rollout is in alignment with the rollout of the devices.

THE Journal: How did you select the Lighthouse Schools?

Imbriale: It wasn’t enough for just the principal to express an interest. We chose only schools that had at least 80 percent faculty buy-in, because we believed the demands on being a Lighthouse School were high enough that we wanted to make sure we had both an administration and a faculty who were willing to go down this path together.

THE Journal: What has pleased you about the way it’s gone in this first year?

Imbriale: These schools have given us an opportunity to really perfect our craft and ensure that when we scale up we have stories to tell — people who have lived through the experience and can share that experience. And what that creates for us are professional learning communities.

This spring we’re aligning each of the 10 Lighthouse elementary schools with another subset of elementary schools that haven’t gone down this road yet. That Lighthouse elementary school can help walk those elementary schools through what this process looks like. It’s a place for them to visit, it’s a place for them to [have a] dialogue, it’s a safe space to have conversations about what this looks like.

The other thing we’ve done is that’s been very helpful is to ask a subset of constitu-ents in each of the schools to blog about their stories and about the journeys that they’re having. It gives us an opportunity to share those stories, to hear about successes and failures and to learn from all those processes.
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