Shifting district culture to deepen student learning

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Technology plays a key role in providing students with the 21st century skills they need, but ultimate success rests on professional development, changing mindsets, and consensus building. That was the message from a recent eSchool News webinar sponsored by Dell and Intel that focused on the efforts of the Roanoke County Public Schools (RCPS) to foster a culture of deeper learning among its 14,000 students.

“If a district wants a successful technology implementation, it must first and foremost think about how it handles professional learning and think of that plan from day one,” said Jon Phillips, director of Dell Global Education Practice, which has partnered with RCPS. “In the end, technology for the sake of technology will not win the day.”

For the past decade—and increasingly in the last three years—Dell Professional Learning has worked with school districts around the world to create a culture of change that extends from the classroom right through a district’s administrative offices. The ultimate goal is to shift the traditional learning experience—where the teacher imparts knowledge from the front of the room—to a framework that is centered around the students themselves.

At first glance, the high-performing RCPS does not seem the kind of school district that would need to reinvent itself or look outside for help: The district has a 97 percent on-time graduation rate. Nevertheless, parents, teachers, and students expressed a desire to go beyond great test scores and pursue the kind of deeper learning skills needed for the new century.

“Are we consistently creating learning experiences across all classrooms that prepare students for their future rather than our past?” said Ken Nicely, director of secondary instruction for RCPS, recalling the kinds of questions the district asked itself. “Are students being equipped with the critical thinking, creative, collaborative, and communication skills called for?”

The district has operated a 1:1 laptop program in its high schools for the past 12 years and recently extended the initiative to the 8th grade. For the program, the district uses Dell Latitude 5420, 3330, and 3340 laptops powered by Intel processors. As pleased as district leaders have been with the 1:1 program, they also recognized that the ubiquity of technology did not in itself represent a sea change in how students were taught or how they learned.
While a survey of students showed that students really appreciated their Dell laptops, what ultimately mattered to them was how teachers used the technology. “The takeaway for us was that we needed to invest in teachers’ professional development on how to use technology in more transformative ways,” said Jeff Terry, CIO at RCPS. “There are no shortcuts.”

When change is imposed top-down, the results are often spotty, with some initiatives gaining no traction at all while others create only pockets of excellence. RCPS wanted to shift the culture of the entire district. It started by building consensus through focus groups held with a variety of stakeholders including students, parents, and teachers. The district also formed a team to develop a new strategic plan known as the Digital C-Change Strategic Framework. Centered on promoting deeper learning, the framework focuses on the four Cs of 21st century skills: Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, and Critical Thinking.

C-Change Teams—involving innovators, early adopters, and the principal—were then organized at each of the district’s 11 secondary schools to continue building consensus and professional capacity. These teams shared best practices and functioned as professional learning communities. “Effective PLCs are simply adult modeling of the four Cs,” explained Terry. “If we want students to develop these skills, we adults need to be good at them, too.”

RCPS also partnered closely with Dell to work with its teachers. “We knew that there would be value in having outside consultants work with teachers rather than just the district leadership,” said Nicely. The Dell Professional Learning team began working at district schools to build what Nicely described as “a foundation of understanding and enthusiasm for working together at the grassroots level” to bring about the desired cultural shift.
To make teachers comfortable during this transition, the Dell Professional Learning team used three complementary approaches: Learning experiences, where a qualified speaker engaged teachers in large sessions; training, where teachers learned how to use the technology in a smaller setting; and—by far the most important—professional growth.

“A meaningful, sustainable shift in culture can—and should—be catalyzed at the district level, but it has to take root at the school and classroom level,” explained Nicely. “Teachers and principals have to get to the point of embracing their own dreams of the kind of learning experiences they want for their students and then act together to make them happen. Deeper learning includes self-directed learning for adults.”

You can view the full webinar at: http://www.eschoolnews.com/events/webinars

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