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Teacher-Approved Technology Implementations

By Heather Ellwood

"After a tech implementation, the last thing I ever want to hear from a teacher is, 'Can you move this piece of technology please? It's in the way of my dry-erase board,'" says Dr. Mel Pace, director of media and instructional technology and technology services in Florida's Osceola County School District.

He's not alone in fearing that technology products, intended to enrich instruction and learning, won't be used to their fullest potential. Much work is done behind the scenes to secure grants and facilitate creative fundraising projects, all with the goal of purchasing state-of-the-art classroom technology – so it can be especially disheartening if these products sit idle. Avoiding such a scenario can be achieved by involving teachers in all aspects of the technology implementation process.

Alan Siegel, who teaches history, civics and economics at W.C. Carle Continuation High School in Lake County, California, is a vocal advocate of involving teachers in all decisions that have an impact on instruction. This 2005 State Teacher of the Year and SMART Exemplary Educator says, "In most situations, technology-buying decisions become a site or district level decision-making process. At my site, teachers drive the decision making. And we have board members come to us after the fact and say, 'We are so thankful we had teachers involved in these decisions because the technology is being used and used well.'"

Important decisions surrounding a large-scale technology implementation are better made with all the stakeholders involved, asserts Siegel. "I mean everybody should be there. Teacher aids. Parents. Students. And especially teachers."



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Alan Siegel

2005 California Teacher of the Year
W.C. Carle Continuation High School
Lake County, California

Asking the right questions

Beth Ekre is a sixth-grade language arts and history teacher at Carl Ben Eielson Middle School in Fargo, North Dakota, and 2009 State Teacher of the Year. She was a member of a technology selection committee and weighed in on Fargo Public Schools' recent decision to make SMART Board™ interactive whiteboards the preferred brand for all the district's elementary schools.

In addition to Ekre, the committee was made up of representatives from the district's technology department. While Ekre maintains that technology experts play an important role in the decision-making process, she believes teachers offer a unique perspective on how technology can enhance student engagement and improve learning outcomes. "I really think that technology should be considered from the vantage point of what teachers need and want to have happen in their classrooms. These committees should be asking what are the teachers' ultimate goals for student outcomes, and what technology can be found to help facilitate that."

When teachers aren't part of the process, they may feel dissatisfied that decisions are being made from the top down, believes Siegel. "Districts and schools need teacher buy-in. They need teachers to see what they can immediately and easily achieve with that tool. By doing that, there's no fear factor, frustration factor or shutdown factor – all of which happen way, way too often."

That's why, when Pace and his team in Osceola County were deciding between two different interactive whiteboard brands, he invited teachers, principals and district resource representatives to be part of the selection committee. In fact, he says, no one from his instructional technology support staff was on the committee.



"We took the selection process very seriously. We designed a rubric and an evaluation form. We were very methodical and kept everything very neutral," Pace explains. "In the end, we chose to standardize on SMART Board interactive whiteboards, and we did so knowing we had made a really sound decision."

Using it on Monday morning

The consultative process didn't end there – according to Pace, it was just beginning. With 48 schools and about 3,000 teachers in Osceola County District, Pace wanted to find a way to open the process up and give all teachers a voice. So he took his tech show on the road, traveling to 7 different locations around the district and making 15 presentations.

Over 500 teachers took part in demos that showed, in a very hands-on way, how SMART Board interactive whiteboards enhance curriculum, display rich content and help teachers prepare and save lessons. "I wanted teachers to understand the potential impact the board would have on their students and learning environments, and to share a few best practices," Pace explains. Those 500 teachers went back to their schools and soon Pace was inundated with requests for school-wide implementations.

Siegel also believes this kind of collaborative process works best. Classroom technology, he maintains, has to be keyed to the needs of the teachers. "Teachers are all about asking, 'Can I use this on Monday morning?' They are very curriculum focused. Whatever the technology, it's just another means of delivering the curriculum. Bringing together teachers and helping them see that their curriculum can be so richly delivered with a tool like a SMART Board interactive whiteboard – that makes good sense."

When teachers are an integral part of the selection process, says Siegel, the tools selected are more likely to be intuitive, easy to use and teacher friendly. "It's one thing to dump a technology tool into the classroom of a teacher who is really technologically savvy. But the average teacher is far too busy to take a whole lot of time to make something work. That's why we chose SMART Boards – they are just incredibly intuitive."

In addition to selecting products with inherent ease of use, Siegel believes it's vital to implement tools made by a company that believes in and understands the vital role of teachers. "In my experience, SMART is all about talking and listening to teachers. It's one of the few companies I've worked with that is truly teacher driven. I can't give SMART enough kudos for the way they listen to teachers. And I think that is reflected in their products – the tools are better because of it."



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Beth Ekre

2009 North Dakota
Teacher of the Year
Carl Ben Eielson Middle School
Fargo, North Dakota



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Dr. Mel Pace

Director of Media and Instructional Technology and Technology Services
Osceola County School District
Kissimmee, Florida

Teaching teachers

If a company is focused on education and education issues, “they should be talking to the people who are on the ground running,” Siegel asserts. Involving teachers in this way helps ensure that, after the decision is made and the product is purchased, the support and resources teachers need and ask for will be readily available.

Ekre believes that getting teachers to use a tool effectively so it brings about a positive impact on student learning outcomes means offering professional development. “If teachers aren’t given training and time to learn the ins and outs of a technology tool, it really has no value. They won’t have the skills to use the tool and, even worse, they won’t want to use it,” Ekre says. Support and training, she believes, will prevent situations in which tools aren’t used effectively or, in the worst case scenario, aren’t used at all.

For many years, Pace was a library media specialist in various schools and the associate director of the School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Florida, so he knows firsthand the value of professional development and the role it plays in technology adoption. That’s why, in Osceola County District, teachers get what Pace calls a “just-in-time” session – seven hours of basic training in SMART Notebook software – immediately before they receive their SMART Board interactive whiteboards. “Teachers need to be given enough time to play with the board. They need to get comfortable enough to feel free to get up in front of people to use it. I want teachers to walk out of the training with Notebook lessons built, ready to go back to their schools,” he explains.

Offering an arsenal of support materials, no matter their format, means teachers will be more apt to connect with classroom technology and make it part of daily instruction, believes Ekre.

“I make sure I ask whether a classroom technology product comes with support materials. For example, I know SMART provides a wealth of resources I can easily access on their website. Plus, I can also join their online community and connect with other educators,” she says. Asking those questions and having all those pieces in place are vital to ensuring widespread adoption.

Pace, Siegel and Ekre are all on the same page when it comes to schools and districts making technology implementation decisions. Involve the teachers and those technology tools will be used well. As Ekre says, “Teachers are the closest to the students. We know the students best. Teachers probably have the most significant impact in any classroom. That’s why they have to be an integral part of any tech selection process.” **EC**

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