

Investing in Engagement

EDCompass newsletter

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Using ARRA Funds to Create Technology-Enabled Classrooms

By Heather Ellwood

"If the children and youth of a nation are afforded opportunity to develop their capacities to the fullest, if they are given the knowledge to understand the world and the wisdom to change it, then the prospects for the future are bright."

Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Two Worlds of Childhood: U.S. and U.S.S.R.*

Affording opportunity. Developing capacities to the fullest. Knowledge. Wisdom. Change. Future. Bronfenbrenner, a leading scholar in developmental psychology and the ecology of human development, wrote these words in 1973, but he might have been describing the current U.S. focus on education. Almost four decades later, his comments cut to the very heart of the goals of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).

But how to turn words into actions? Actions into results? These decisions are significant, and a bit daunting. But the responsibility to invest these funds is a good challenge to have. District- and school-level administrators want to make choices that will have long-lasting effects on student outcomes.

Elizabeth Martin of Memorial High School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is considering these issues carefully. As principal of one of Tulsa Public School District's largest high schools, with over 1,200 students and 90 teachers, she finds her responsibility to spend recently awarded Title I funds "awe-inspiring, but gratifying."

"I have to make sure my staff and I make good decisions. You make the best decision with the information that you have at that time, and you do the very best you can with what you know," Martin says. She adds that this is the first time Memorial High School has qualified for Title I funding, and they "have a lot of catching up to do when it comes to technology."

Leading with instructional goals

Bruce Umpstead, state director of educational technology and data coordination for the Michigan department of education, spends a great deal of his time helping educators like Martin make sound investment decisions. He advises that states, districts and schools begin by defining an overall educational technology goal and the strategies that will achieve it. In fact, he says if he could suggest only one approach for investing stimulus funds, it would be not to lead with technology, but rather to start by identifying instructional strategies that support an overall goal or objective. In Michigan, he explains, they started by clarifying their state-wide goal – teaching for learning.

"Next, we identified the instructional strategies that will make teaching for learning happen. Now our districts can adopt these technologies that make those strategies work. It pulls the technology into the classroom and reverses our need to push," says Umpstead.

For Umpstead, the ARRA funds represent an opportunity for districts and schools to purchase educational technology that scaffolds instruction to meet overall student-centered goals. You won't hear any disagreement on this point from Debra Jacoby, the chief financial officer of Union Public



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Debra Jacoby

Chief Financial Officer
Union Public Schools
Tulsa, Oklahoma



Schools in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Spending the ARRA funds on “the kinds of technology that have long-lasting effects,” Jacoby says, will help prepare the district’s nearly 900 teachers to achieve their overarching goal – “to make sure that all students are actively engaged in the learning process. Our teachers believe that a student who is actively engaged in the classroom experience is actively engaged in learning.”

After a year of piloting the SMART Board™ interactive whiteboard in each of Union Public’s 18 schools, the district decided to use Title I and ARRA funds to purchase around 340 additional boards. Every site will have at least five of these SMART Board interactive whiteboards, with many more allocated to schools that qualify for Title I status.

Just as Umpstead advises, this classroom technology was chosen to support instruction. Jacoby explains, “The teachers want to make sure they are using strategies that engage the students, and bringing the SMART Board into our classrooms is one of the ways they will accomplish that.”

Memorial High School’s investment of ARRA and Title I funds was on a somewhat smaller scale than Union Public’s, as the decisions were made at the school rather than district level. But Martin and her staff were similarly focused on first clearly defining an instructional goal – to increase student engagement. Because Martin wanted to be sure she was making an informed investment that would help accomplish her school’s objectives, she didn’t want to make it alone. She turned to her staff for advice.

“Collectively, we decided to purchase SMART Board interactive whiteboards. One of the main reasons we went with the SMART Board was because we saw what other district schools have done with it. We have watched and listened, and we know they have been very successful. Most importantly, we find it wonderful that this one technology product covers such a wide spectrum of uses,” Martin explains. It helped that the school already had four of the boards – both she and the teachers had seen student engagement rise in the classes that used them.

“We need to look at opportunities that enhance lessons and bring them to another level, and the SMART Board helps us do that,” Martin says. Memorial High School will receive enough funding to purchase 20 SMART Board interactive whiteboards – not enough to enable every classroom, but a step in the right direction, she believes.

Preparing for success

By investing in educational technology that helps raise student engagement, Martin expects student outcomes will rise. This will mean better results on report cards and fewer students who drop out, increasing the percentage of graduates, students accepted into higher education institutions and so on – into the future. This ripple effect on the nation’s youth is what the U.S. government anticipates the ARRA funding will achieve.

Umpstead echoes this reasoning, saying, “When it come to the potential impact of the stimulus funding going to educational technology, and the resulting increased technology integration into



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Elizabeth Martin
Principal, Memorial High School
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Tulsa, Oklahoma



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schools, I think you will see a spike in the level of student engagement. And research shows us there is a positive correlation or relationship between engagement and student achievement.”

But he cautions that to see this increase in student engagement, teachers must be given the skills to use the technology effectively. Michigan places as much emphasis on professional learning as on student resources because, says Umpstead, “if the teachers aren’t given the preparation necessary to use these classroom technologies, they won’t.”

Union Public Schools’ district administrators also consider teacher education crucial. To ensure the investment in SMART Board interactive whiteboards pays dividends, they will be providing extensive professional development. The district plans to use Union’s own teachers as trainers who can share ideas and best practices. “We find that teachers who are a little less aggressive with technologies like the SMART Board can build up their comfort level when they are learning from their colleagues,” Jacoby explains.

Jacoby believes that the effects of Union’s investment in technology will be felt for years to come, especially for Title I schools, which will receive the bulk of the funding. Teachers in those schools, she knows, “will come up with exciting and inventive instructional ideas for utilizing the SMART Board to make classroom learning a more active and engaging experience. As we find additional funds down the road to purchase other SMART Board interactive whiteboards for our non-Title I schools, we will have experienced teachers ready to train the rest of our staff.”

Involving the community

In addition to professional development, another piece of the technology integration puzzle is strengthened communication with parents and the greater community. Umpstead emphasizes that “stakeholders need to understand that the key to achieving better outcomes and results is to make instruction more student centered.” Products such as interactive whiteboards help schools do so, and it’s up to the administration and staff to demonstrate that connection to parents and community members.

Schools and districts should be clear that this special, once-in-a-lifetime funding is not being used to buy technology for the sake of buying technology. Rather, it is part of a careful plan to enhance clearly identified instructional strategies that lead to the achievement of an overarching goal. “To achieve a more student-centered model, you can’t do it without technology,” says Umpstead. “Interactive whiteboards and other digital media devices in the classroom make classroom learning come alive.”

Martin and her staff plan to achieve their goals by always focusing on the most important stakeholders – their students. “As a school community, we are continually looking for academic improvement from our students. We are constantly seeking out new ways to keep them in school. We have to continue to look at how we can reach the kids we’re not reaching. Using these ARRA funds to invest in technology, such as interactive whiteboards, is one way we can attempt to do these things,” she says.

Across America, schools in situations similar to those in Michigan and Oklahoma are choosing to invest in educational technology that best raises student engagement and increases student outcomes. As Bronfenbrenner said so many years ago, if the children and youth are afforded the opportunity to develop their capacities to the fullest, their prospects for the future, and ours, are bright. **EC**

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