



Schools of Excellence

Each year, PSBA recognizes districts modeling excellence in educational technology. The PSBA Schools of Excellence in Technology program is designed to encourage districts excelling in educational technology to share best practices and ideas collegially with other districts in the state.

The 2011 Schools of Excellence in Technology are Bradford Area SD, Butler Area SD and Penn Manor SD.

An organic technology movement excels at Penn Manor SD

By Cassandra Mocyk Davis

Technology at Penn Manor SD is widespread and diverse. While there are core technology elements used district-wide, staff are not mandated to use specialty programs unless they choose to do so. Superintendent Dr. Michael Lechlitter said working with a core group of interested teachers on specialty technology uses can create a buzz throughout the buildings and make new uses attractive to those who may be apprehensive to try something different. "The core interested group uses new tools and helps gain buy-in from other teachers once they see what the technology can do," he said.

Technology Director Charlie Reisinger echoes Lechlitter's sentiments. "Early on, I've learned that staff and teachers were far more interested in technology when it happens organically," he said. "The power is in the network, in collaboration – when teachers band together to make choices on what they want to use. The ivory tower, top-down approach does not work well."

His advice to staff overwhelmed by the number of technology tools available? "Focus on one or two things you do really well. There are too many tools to be experts on all tools and applications," he said.

Professional development opportunities abound

Penn Manor SD's professional development is comprehensive and continuous. While once offered

in three- or six-hour blocks, Reisinger found it more helpful to provide an hour of directive instruction, allow teachers to use the program and then provide a question-and-answer follow-up session, where teachers share how they are using the program. "Even if you're highly motivated and very interested in the subject, it's hard to continue to absorb knowledge after six hours," he said.

Lechlitter also hears feedback about the benefits of this model of professional development. "Everything makes sense when teachers are sitting in the classroom in the summer learning the new program," he said. "But then when they implement it in their classrooms, they may encounter something unanticipated in training. The follow-up is then especially beneficial."

Reisinger refers to this as a move from just-in-case training to just-in-time training. "Staff really respond to having the ongoing support, not just the one-time shot," he said.

While many districts are moving to online learning opportunities, Penn Manor SD currently does not have content designed or authored by the district. Staff prefer instructor-led and hands-on learning. This type of training provides teachers with a model for use in the classroom, teaching technology

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in Technology

to students. The district does, however, maintain an ongoing subscription to the Virtual Training Company, with online courses for virtually every technology topic available for staff use.

Unique offerings for students

Penn Manor has boasted some unique student offerings that use technology. Most projects, as Reisinger points out, began with a teacher connection or interest. Second-grade students were able to interact with students in India via video conferencing. High school students struggling with reading created podcast book chats, giving them an alternative outlet to express what they learn and allowing them to become book critics. These syndicated podcasts have been downloaded close to 100,000 times. The district's Rocket Team won first place in the Third Annual Transatlantic Rocketry Challenge at the Farnborough Air Show in England in July 2010. "These opportunities are available because of a marriage between really good instruction, interested student participants and innovative technology tools," Reisinger said. "The instructor is able to match technology with something that is highly engaging."

In another case, the district moved its newspaper online, to create an online news magazine, Penn Points. While students previously had difficulty turning in assignments on time, the idea of an immediately published project now has students scrambling to write more articles than ever. "Our print newspaper would be read by maybe a couple hundred people," Reisinger said. "By the time it was printed, the news would be stale. When the decision to move 100% online came up, we knew there were risks involved – students would be publishing directly on the Internet. And who would read it? There were many reservations towards making the switch, but it



Above: Student rocketeers prepare and launch rockets for an elementary school audience.

Top: Penn Points is the district's online-only news magazine.



has been a resounding success," he said. "Last week, we clocked 355,000 viewers. That's a huge shift from the population that used to read it."

Cutting-edge course offerings also provide students with technology opportunities. Two examples – game design and computer animation – were driven by a gifted instructor, willing students and a district that wasn't afraid to take a risk. With game design came apprehension from parents – but the skills taught could be used in the now multi-billion dollar gaming industry. "Historically, we have not been afraid to try new things, especially when we see a shift in business and industry," Reisinger said.

A cyber opportunity

With a rise in costs for students attending cyber charter schools, Penn Manor SD partnered with



Above: Students use Linux open-source software on netbooks for their work.

Top: Technology is used for the STEM curriculum in elementary grades.

Right: Penn Manor SD students use Skype to communicate with students in India.



other districts in the IU 13 region to create a virtual high school – the Lancaster-Lebanon Virtual School. It's specifically offered to families who are attending cyber charter schools, in an effort to bring them back to the Penn Manor SD, while still receiving the virtual education. The program, in its infancy, currently hosts six students who take classes fully online. At the end of the sequence, they will graduate with a Penn Manor SD diploma. "For all intents and purposes, these students are Penn Manor students, enrolled in a different 'building,'" Reisinger said.

Leichliter cited two main reasons for this new offering – to cut down on district money going to cyber charter schools and to offer virtual options, something parents want more for their children. The district believes that from its experience with students coming back from cyber charters – with unclear transcripts, making it hard for guidance counselors to figure out what they've learned – it can provide a better virtual education, held to the same level of standards and accountability as the rest of the district.

Penn Manor SD is also looking to create a blended option – with brick-and-mortar and virtual classes – for students who would benefit from a hybrid, open-campus model. "We've discovered many families are interested in the blended offerings because of their child's legitimate health issues. These are students who want to be in school, but for some physical or health reason, school is not an option for them," Reisinger said.

The digital native myth

One area Reisinger feels very strongly about is the assumption that children today are digital natives. "The idea that kids are somehow wired in their DNA to understand technology is a misnomer," he said. He admits children today are fast learners and they are very engaged with technology – it's how they want to learn. But they don't come to school with all the skills needed to use technology to learn. "Gaming experience does not mean they are able to research a topic, find primary authoritative sources and then make good critical, analytical decisions about those sources, and put them together in a meaningful

presentation," he said. "Kids still need to work to develop those skills. We still have that work to do – in the form of technology skills instruction and computer skills courses. That work is ongoing."

One area he feels fortunate is the accessibility to technology in Penn Manor SD. Ten years ago, the district distributed a paper survey assessing the access to technology and Internet in homes. With over 90% responding they had access, the district saw a green light to move forward with online initiatives. Reisinger acknowledges that this accessibility could change as poverty increases, but district officials still believe there is evidence that technology access levels tend to be high across the district.

The board and community support system

At Penn Manor SD, staff is not afraid to take risks – and the board and administration is not afraid to say no, within reason. "We have a high level of trust with our students and teachers," Reisinger said. The trust is also held by the board, which has been extremely supportive of the technology initiatives in the district.

"We have a board that understands technology, its strategic value, not only operationally but from the instructional side," Reisinger said. Leichliter added that the board insists on equal opportunity across the district. "Despite being large geographically, they want to make sure there is a common level of access and opportunity on equipment," he said. "With our lean technology department operating in a very

frugal and fiscally responsible manner, the board is very accommodating to requests, knowing the district doesn't throw money at problems."

Community support is also fostered through constant communication – through the district website, Twitter, blogs, news publications and presentations, the community is often involved in district happenings. Reisinger, an advocate for Internet safety, often holds information sessions for the public, and the district also provides technology classes for senior citizens; something he said other districts can easily do to engage a part of the community that usually has no interest in the district other than when taxes increase.

A practice worth sharing

Penn Manor SD strives to provide students with up-to-date technology tools in a way that is fiscally responsible. "The tricky challenge for every district moving forward is going to be how do you sustain

initiatives, such as Classrooms for the Future, where they've unloaded huge amounts of cash as a one-time grant? How do you sustain replacement and continue to provide relatively cutting-edge technology for students on a shoestring budget," asked Reisinger. His answer – open-source software options. These tools permeate every aspect of technology at Penn Manor SD. These free software tools also can be modified for specific district needs. For example, the district uses Koha Library Management System and LibreOffice, which includes applications similar to Microsoft Office tools. "Philosophically it makes a lot of sense," Reisinger said, "because there is freedom – the physical price is free and there is freedom in the ability to modify the programs." He believes many districts could benefit from the use of open-source technology options and doesn't mind sharing the wealth. "It's all public money – we're not competing with other school districts, so why not help each other out." **b**

For more information on the innovative efforts at Penn Manor SD, visit www.pennmanor.net, www.pennmanor.net/techblog and <http://blogs.pennmanor.net>.

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