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Innovation Renaissance

School leaders can foster a culture of innovation in their districts that nurtures and supports new ideas and tools, while focusing on achievement and improvement

Ann Lee Flynn

What is innovation? Out of hundreds of thousands of Google definitions, this one by Hutch Carpenter, a Spigit software executive, is one of the simplest: "a change in a product offering, service, business model, or operation which meaningfully improves the experience of a large number of stakeholders."

With so many definitions floating around out there, it's no surprise technology innovation in education can trigger lots of different thoughts. For me, it means always scanning the horizon for ideas or solutions that have been created from scratch, or adapted from another industry, that address the challenges faced by educators, administrators, and school board members.

As an eternal optimist and someone who has followed technology innovation closely for the past 20 years, I've seen some big wins and some even bigger disappointments. But in K-12 education, the biggest wins have been in districts that create a culture that nurtures and supports new tools and ideas, maintains a keen focus on the educational challenges they need to address, and engages in a thoughtful process of evaluation and continual improvement.

Policies for innovation

In software circles, policies that encourage employees to work on whatever they like—provided the work advances their companies in some way—are well known, such as Google's 20 percent time that resulted in the creation of Gmail, and decades earlier, the creation of 3M's Post-It notes from a simi-

lar program. These policies are not the norm in public education. There's lots of talk about the need for innovation, but how does it actually happen in a district?

For so many, just like other organizations, the day-to-day issues consume the lion's share of time. That's why I was impressed 20 years ago when former Vancouver Public Schools Superintendent James Parsley shared how he dedicated a percentage of his time to thinking about the future. NSBA will be hosting one of its Technology Leadership Network (TLN) site visits with Vancouver in May, and although Parsley retired in 2002, the culture of forward-focused thinking remains evident in the district's accomplishments.

Lisa Greseth, Vancouver's manager of information and instructional technolgy and one of NSBA's 2012 "20 to Watch" educators, is an example of how employees flourish in cultures that embrace new ideas. Like other "20 to Watch" educators, she exemplifies the kind of inquisitive nature and ability to inspire that are essential traits for champions of innovation to possess.

A key to treading the tricky waters of innovation is to have a clear process in place that encourages innovative products to be brought forward and a set of criteria to determine if an emerging company shows sufficient promise for the product to undergo greater review.

But simply supporting new ideas is not enough. Real innovation can thrive only in organizations where the failure of a new effort is evaluated as a learning experience rather than serving as an excuse to point fingers and exact punishment.

Much can be done to lessen the likelihood of failure by creating processes like the Innovation and Change Committee in place at Illinois' Township High School District 214 (which is also hosting a 2103 TLN site visit) or through the use of pilot programs with tech-savvy teachers and administrators like those used by Jennette Kane, technology integration supervisor in Ohio's Orange City Schools, and Ronald Walker, superintendent of Kansas' Unified School District 475.

Walker wants to ensure new products are compatible with the district's technology plan, and agrees with Kane that solutions should be user friendly, meet instructional needs, be scalable, and be affordable. Like Greseth in Vancouver, these two former "20 to Watch" educators have created a culture that values new ways of thinking and offers hope to a growing number of companies anxious to break into the education market.

Corporate-influenced innovation

For entrepreneurs, innovation can equate to dollar signs. The right technology, embraced by enough districts, can set them on a path for financial success either through acquisition by a larger company or expansion. Factors that make a market segment like education look attractive include the potential size of the market and the perception that it has plenty of room for improvement.

Rhetoric about the failures of public education, expanding broadband access and other technical advances, and greater reliance on technology in society as a whole are creating an enticing scenario for possible success. On the other hand, educational institutions are notorious for their perceived resistance to change.

A new breed of edupreneurs (educators turned business people) tend to be equally passionate about leveraging their experiences as educators to not only do well financially, but to

The 2013 Technology Innovation Showcase companies

These emerging companies represent the diversity of new solutions the Showcase was created to highlight:

BloomBoard is helping educators grow by providing a free platform to manage the entire feedback cycle for improving educator effectiveness (observations, coaching, and individualized learning plans, etc.), connected to recommendations from an open marketplace of professional development resources.

Guide K12 uses the power of geovisual analytics to let districts look at student data in new ways for the purpose of forecasting, capacity planning, and boundary discussions and to get immediate answers to "what if" questions.

Nearpod is an all-in-one solution for the synchronized use of iPads and other mobile devices in the classroom that is helping redefine the traditional classroom lecture through interactive presentations and real-time assessments.

TenMarks is a Web-based learning environment that super-charges math instruction by delivering contextual help, automatic interventions, real-time assessments, and a personalized curriculum for every student.

VizZle/Monarch Teaching Technologies is committed to providing technology-enhanced solutions that offer districts more effective, yet cost-efficient, data-driven tools that support children with autism and other special learning needs.

World Wide Workshop-Globaloria Platform is a blended-learning platform with a results-proven curriculum and educator support system to teach youth to produce STEM games with industry-standard methods and tools to increase digital literacy and global citizenship skills, and to promote engagement in STEM and Computing.

The 2013 Class will be featured in an exclusive Innovation Showcase Pavilion and Showcase session during NSBA's annual conference in San Diego, April 13 to 15. In addition, they will be highlighted through webinars and white papers designed for districts active in NSBA's Technology Leadership Network.

"do good" at the same time. Many of these edupreneurs, like those with Teach for America backgrounds, have traveled more unconventional paths through the education system, and are inspired to fix problems they faced firsthand.

And while the concept of innovation often comes with a positive glow, research about public perceptions of education technology indicates that, it might not be the best term to use with some parents and educators. They often equate innovative with experimental, and they are not interested in having their students used as guinea pigs with untested strategies and devices.

Investment flurry

Current investments in education technology have surpassed those dot-com days of the late 1990s that were spurred by enthusiasm for the Internet, right before the bubble burst. Several factors are contributing to this current flurry of activity, especially for instruction. New materials aligned to the Common Core State Standards will now meet the needs of the majority of states in the country.

New electronic product delivery options through the cloud, and more online marketing strategies, driven by word-of-mouth through social media, further reduce old barriers to entry in the education marketplace. They eliminate or reduce the need for warehouses, old-style sales forces, and direct mail catalogs. Finally, new entrants to the education sector have a host of tools at their disposal to deliver ongoing robust professional development that supports their products in less expensive ways.

Whether intentional or not, the more than $389 million invested in 2011 (up from $13 million in 2005, according to GSV Advisors, an investment firm specializing in education) that is flowing to new education companies is helping shape public perceptions about education. Districts not willing to thoughtfully consider possibilities introduced by new tools or approaches further reinforce the notion that educators are reluctant to change. This perceived reluctance prompts some investors to join the chorus of those calling for change in school governance.

So what's a district to do? Try anything that comes along or just say no? Some technology solutions will be truly disruptive, while others simply may allow the same practices to be sustained, but with a new technology twist.

One underlying question to consider with new products is whether they are seen as a threat by certain employees. If so, the likelihood of a successful pilot or smooth implementation is greatly diminished. On the other hand, if those initial fears are taken into account and the product is introduced as an opportunity to more effectively accomplish the district's goal and is supported with the appropriate professional development, the road to success is much shorter.

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Showcasing innovation

Today's rapid pace of investments and development, along with sweeping conversations about innovation and reform, inspired the creation of NSBA's first Technology Innovation Showcase. The companies were selected for their unique approaches, understanding of the K-12 environment, demonstrated success, and potential promise. The program was conceived as a bridge between those developing new solutions and those charged with implementing them.

If these companies can ignite conversations among school board members and administrators about the culture of innovation in their districts and how new solutions are identified and evaluated, it will have accomplished the purpose of the program.

Each submission was reviewed by teams of teachers, superintendents, principals, and other education professionals. This year's first class of six Technology Innovation Showcase companies represents a diverse group of solutions and include BloomBoard, GuideK12, Nearpod, TenMarks, VizZle/Monarch Teaching Technologies, and World Wide Workshop-Globaloria Platform.

However, the scope of time-saving ideas and instructional enhancements offered by other applicants suggest there are no shortage of creative options available to districts open to innovation. Electronic processes to gather permission slips or manage food allergy records (ZippSlip and Allergen, respectively); USynch's student collaboration platform; streamlined teacher evaluation tools from Observe4Success; or UPSTART's approach to getting pre-K children ready to succeed—each has the potential to completely transform old practices.

The delicate balance that school leaders must achieve is in how to explore new ideas while not being afraid to say no to those who don't support their district's mission and vision. One step in wading through the explosion of new companies is staying abreast of emerging trends and realizing that certain technological advancements can usher in a new generation of providers with similar offerings.

NSBA's Showcase submissions, along with other recent lists of promising startups like the Software Information Industries Association's Innovation Incubator, clearly reflect emerging companies gathering around certain trends. Follow the money. One of the earliest indicators of emerging trends is where the investors are placing their bets. An easy way for administrators and board members to get a peek inside the world of education startups and their investors is through free, weekly e-newsletters, like *EdSurge*, or by following Audrey Waters, who shares witty, fast-paced insights into that world in her blog.

Remember, you'll be reading about the innovators who are busy shaping your future education technology solutions. ■

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