

How do two ‘connected districts’ do it?

By Laura Devaney, Managing Editor

December 16, 2013

Here’s how your fellow administrators create and sustain connected schools

Educators and administrators enjoy sharing their success stories and like to help fellow school districts see success in their own initiatives and efforts.

Whether it’s blended learning, bring-your-own-device, or other ed-tech initiatives, school district administrators are making sure that their classrooms are connected and able to prepare students for college and the workforce.

Personalization and individual learning experiences

The 95,000 students in Georgia’s Fulton County Schools have different learning styles and interests, and district administrators say they believe students’ learning opportunities should mirror their preferences and needs.

“We’re all about personalization and trying to create individual experiences for each of our students,” said Scott Muri, the district’s deputy superintendent of academics. “We recognize that students move at their own pace. We’re trying to validate and support the speed with which kids want to progress.”

Technology enables that flexibility, Muri said.

“We recognize that because of the advent of technology and its power and significance, we can finally personalize the connected classroom to a big degree like we’ve never been able to do,” he said.

In November of 2011, voters approved a \$1 billion tax referendum that devoted \$750 million to new school construction and \$250 million to technology for schools and classrooms.

Using seat time waivers, students are able to move through their course content at their preferred pace.

District officials are exploring bring-your-own-device (BYOD) technologies for classrooms, and are focusing in particular on “how to create healthy connected environments to support an individual’s desire to use their own tools in the district environment,” Muri said.

Fulton County also is investigating one-to-one opportunities for students, with an emphasis on helping teachers effectively integrate tools in the teaching and learning environment.

“The most important piece of what we’re doing is developing teachers’ capacity,” Muri said. The district uses a technology integration matrix to help teachers determine where they fall along the spectrum, and then professional development is designed around each teacher’s results.

Fulton Virtual Campus, the district's online school, lets teachers conduct online assessments, develop lesson plans, and collaborate with fellow teachers and students. Teachers and students use Edmodo, a social learning platform, in classrooms to share ideas and stay connected.

Fulton County media specialists are beginning to think differently about their roles, and administrators developed a new job description that aligns the media specialist role with a variety of 21st century expectations so that the role "is not siloed off," Muri said.

Access remains a challenge for the district, which counts 45 percent of its students as economically disadvantaged. While district tech officials are building a network to support two devices per student and teacher as they anticipate a growing BYOD environment, they also are outlining different ways to ensure that every student actually does have at least one device, whether that device is personal or provided by the district.

Muri said the district is focusing on a number of priorities to ensure that technology is successful in classrooms:

- **Management:** "We have to walk slowly now so that we can run later," Muri said. "Part of that is building capacity of different people—first and foremost, our teachers—to effectively integrate tools of technology. When teachers use tools ineffectively, achievement declines. We want to increase rigor and achievement, and the only way that will happen is if we have highly-effective teachers who are well-trained—and that happens with baby steps."
- **Infrastructure:** "We're building a very robust wireless infrastructure in each school. That work is happening today [in preparation for] when we do have devices in the hands of all our kids," Muri said. "How do we support this? What does it look like? We're thinking about it strategically and methodically, and trying to make sure we don't trip and fall along the way, but if we do, we learn from those mistakes."

"Learning is not only something that you do as an individual, but it's something that you can do collectively," Muri said. "The business world needs employees who can work effectively as a team—not only with people in the same room, but virtually, because technology enables us to collaborate with others around the world. The more we can enable that for our students, the better."

Paperless collaboration

Stibaly Johnson, a sixth grade teacher at Rohr Elementary School in California's Chula Vista Elementary School District, has gone paperless in her classroom. Johnson flips her classroom using Educreations to record and share lessons with her students. She also uses Khan Academy videos or visits WatchKnowLearn.

"Homework has become a lot easier, and parents have the lesson right in front of them," Johnson said, which gives parents a refresher on their own elementary school lessons and also helps parents become more connected to their children's learning.

Johnson uses as much virtual and online collaboration as possible, including online discussion groups to discuss books read in class and posing online questions on Edmodo and letting students interact in a private setting.

"I jump in and out of their conversations," Johnson said. "Students have a voice, and shy students are now discussing more and learning the rules of academic discourse."

Students submit their writing to Johnson through Edmodo, and she said she is able to offer quicker and more personalized feedback and follow-up. This, she said, helps her students grow more academically, and classroom time becomes more connected and engaging.

This year, Johnson volunteered to host an optional after-school Edmodo training session for any interested teachers in her school. A surprisingly large number of teachers attended, she said, and administrator support has been crucial.

“We have a really good support system,” Johnson said. “Our superintendent is completely on board. Every school has technology integrated into professional development. My principal sees the value in integrating these 21st century skills into classroom instruction. Having strong district leaders who can support us, and having a superintendent who can support the classroom integration of technology, is key.”

Administrator trust is equally important.

“Having administrators trust teachers to know what we need is what makes a technology initiative successful,” she said.

This kind of online collaboration, whether it’s between two classrooms in the same district, across the nation, or between teachers and administrators in different states, will be important as the Common Core State Standards move into implementation.

“It’s one thing for us to connect within a district,” Johnson said. “It’s even more important for us to be connecting within the nation and being able to have that support across the country. We need to be able to share resources.”

“I’m wondering if there’s anybody out there who isn’t connected,” Johnson said. “We can’t be grasping at straws when it comes to the Common Core. What better way to be connected than online?”