

By Lotta Larson, Teresa Miller, and Mike Ribble

## 5 Considerations for Digital Age Leaders

What Principals and District Administrators Need to Know about Tech Integration Today

**T**echnology has forever altered the way we learn and teach, and the pace of change is only accelerating. What was hot last year or even last month may be of little interest today. How can educational leaders keep up with the daily onslaught of information when new literacies rapidly outpace traditional literacies, and access to technology and information expands exponentially? Administrators and teacher leaders have to take personal responsibility for understanding changes in tech implementation and integration in their buildings and classrooms rather than simply relying on technology support staff. It is up to the building-level staff, district personnel, and educational leaders to move schools into the digital age.

Here we suggest five considerations, aligned with ISTE's NETS for Administrators ([www.iste.org/nets](http://www.iste.org/nets)), for initiating a shared vision that embeds tech integration into all aspects of learning and teaching.

Individual districts vary in how technological they are (or think they are), so any action plan needs multiple levels of experience and usage. The following list provides a springboard for conversations as school leaders seek to assess the status and logistics for progress toward 21<sup>st</sup>-century classrooms.





## one | Visionary Leadership

It is easier to move forward when everyone stops moving sideways. Districts should strive to create and implement a shared vision that integrates technology into all aspects of learning and teaching. Without a specific plan for technology, districts remain awash in an ocean of ideas, losing valuable time while staff members haphazardly organize themselves. All school leaders (administrators, teacher leaders, and instructional technology staff) need ownership in the vision to keep the technology plan moving in the right direction.

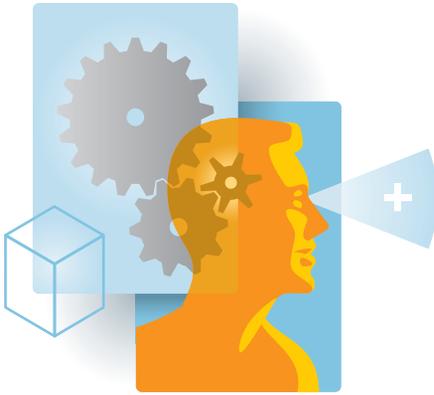
As technology becomes more user friendly and accessible, technology leadership becomes increasingly complex. Students and teachers may believe that they can use technology in the same ways they do at home, without an understanding of the larger educational system and ramifications. But the larger the district, the more multifaceted the technology plan becomes, as leaders identify existing assets and needs while providing the resources for staff.

As there is often a just-in-time need for resources, administrators must provide quick direction for their teachers. They can do this much more efficiently if the district has adopted a proactive technology plan before such urgent needs arise. In fact, a proactive vision is crucial for lasting and effective technology integration.

## two | Digital Age Learning Culture

Concepts of learning and teaching have changed drastically over the past decade. Teachers are no longer the sole providers of knowledge because information is easily accessible on the Internet. As a result, all those connected to learning and teaching must first renew their vision to establish digital learning environments. Teachers need to be able to connect to their students' digital worlds to engage and motivate a new and very different type of learner. As eloquently expressed by Mortimer Zuckerman, editor in chief of *U.S. News & World Report*, "the classroom teachers would play the role of enhancers, answering questions and helping students better understand the material covered electronically."

For many teachers, adding one more thing to a curriculum that's already full may seem virtually impossible, especially when the focus is on high-stakes testing of core areas such as reading and math. Consequently, it is vital that administrators, teachers, and technology leaders focus on the same collaborative vision of sound technology integration across core curricula. To further support a digital learning culture, educational leaders must critically assess how much technology students have access to and how often they access it. As online state assessments demand more computer use, students have little time and fewer resources left for creative and innovative uses of school com-



## Main Ideas for Administrators

Make sure that you listen to all groups before making technology decisions. The technology staff may have valid reasons why something can or cannot be done.

Don't always let money be the stumbling block. First come up with the plan, then identify what you can implement first and what you can do later.

Curriculum departments need to be involved in technology decisions. A curriculum department's objectives should coincide with any technology plan.

Don't take shortcuts. Spend the time to do the research, then move forward.

Be flexible. Have a plan but keep up on where technology is going in education. You don't have to jump on every bandwagon, but watch for trends.

puters. School leaders must ask themselves questions such as, "Is it OK to block off significant amounts of time for test preparation at the expense of time to use digital tools?" or "How can a new, shared vision help us rethink what a typical classroom should look like?"

## three | Systemic Improvement

Leaders at all levels must take a systems perspective on technology and predict the long-term ramifications of decisions. To keep on track, school leaders at all levels need to look within their schools to identify gaps in their technology needs related to the shared vision. Reaction plans should reflect current realities but also continue to move forward, toward the long-term goal. If technology is a priority for your district, are you evaluating how and if students and teachers are using technology in classrooms? If you are going to expend resources on tools, you need to have some guarantee that people are going to use them efficiently. Simultaneously, you should align policies and procedures related to technology with the district's overall vision.

Not all technology staffs are equal. Some districts are fortunate to have lead technology people who understand both technology and curriculum. Instructional technology staff, administrators, and teachers need to be able to communicate with each other about needs and perspectives. Teachers should communicate with instructional technology staff about their needs; instructional technology staff must understand those needs to support teachers in the classroom; and administrators need to be able to talk with, listen to, and act on requests from instructional technology staff and teachers. To continue improving the organization through the effective and creative use of technology resources, leaders must provide digital age leadership.

## four | Excellence in Professional Practice

Professional growth opportunities that match the vision are essential to the implementation process. Only through ongoing, consistent, leveled professional development opportunities can users gain the technology skills and confidence needed to teach the new literacies. Larger districts may have instructional technology staff to provide needed support, but smaller districts need to find alternative methods to fill this gap. Early adopters can establish a teaching cadre to assist in district-wide training.

Additional options for staff development include bringing in experts from the outside or using online and prepackaged training services. These opportunities cannot be one-time programs. They must offer ongoing, consistent support for educators. Some include:

- Start users at one skill level and then allow them to move through subsequent levels in a tiered program to acquire more knowledge with technology while documenting their training outcomes and products. These programs may also provide a way for users with advanced skills to test out.
- Provide incentives for those who complete training cycles (e.g., if you take a session on digital photography, you receive a digital camera to use in your classroom).
- Use blogs, wikis, or course management systems, such as Moodle, to create and share courses or information with teachers.
- Provide time during the school day to have teachers work with the technology in their classrooms.

- Encourage teachers to collaborate for training and/or implementation.
- Create a core group of trainers to teach others.
- Encourage attendance at regional technology conferences.
- Provide information about free online resources.

The opportunities are endless. It is up to the creativity of the leaders to find the best solutions to move their districts forward while working collaboratively with all stakeholders.

In moving forward, it is important to promote technology use not as playing with gadgets, but as accessing tools to make educators and learning more effective at motivating, engaging, and preparing students for their futures.

## five | Digital Citizenship

One area of consideration that administrators often overlook is the appropriate use of technology within districts. They ask users to sign and support acceptable use policies (AUPs) but often don't make it clear what they mean or how to use technology appropriately.

Throughout the three sets of NETS, ISTE identifies that all users in a district should understand the "social, ethical, and legal issues and responsibilities as related to technology." To accomplish this, it is the obligation of all educational leaders to lead by example.

Multiple resources help to provide a framework for these issues. For example, the ISTE book *Digital Citizenship in Schools* by Gerald Bailey and Mike Ribble identifies nine themes for users to break down digital citizenship into respective components and provides resources for educational leaders to begin setting up plans and programs within their districts.

All leaders need a springboard to open the discussion with their faculties and staff about appropriate technology use. Educators can then provide that information to their students, as everyone needs to work together to identify and understand the appropriate and effective use of technology in education.

## Digital Age Leadership

Technology has added a new level of responsibility for school leaders. Many consider themselves unprepared or unqualified to identify and integrate technology in their own practice. It is important to move past any reservations and discomforts to prepare students for the futures they deserve. Now is the time for educational leaders to focus the conversation on how technology fits within their classrooms to best meet their students' needs. If we want our children to be competitive on a global level in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need to be visibly using and talking about these tools for learning and teaching. The future is already here, and we have to welcome the opportunities it brings to reshape instruction.



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