



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 districts will be featured at the PASA-PSBA School Leadership Conference Oct. 18-21, 2011, at the Hershey Lodge & Convention Center in Hershey, PA.

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

A reflective road guides Bradford Area SD to technology success

By Cassandra Mocyk Davis

At Bradford Area SD, technology has been used across grade levels to further engage, better assess and promote achievement of students. "In order for our instructional program to be relevant to our students, it must include cutting edge technology which reflects the world in which they live," said Sandra Romanowski, Bradford Area SD superintendent.

The district uses a diverse array of tools to create learning environments. Smart Boards, iPods, laptops and Kindles are just a few used to meet the needs of various learners and sustain their engagement in the learning process. A recent visit to an elementary school classroom after introducing iPods left science teacher Dr. John Kriner stunned. "Every single student had the device within six inches of their face, mouths wide open, fingers furiously working," he said. And the best part? "They weren't working on games, they were working on educational apps," he said. "They were completely engrossed."

Fifth-grade student Jakob VanCise enjoys the technology in the classroom. "Smart Boards are good for students," he said. "It is more interesting because it is digital and has pictures and video clips. It helps the teachers teach us what we need to know."

While new tools for students keep them engaged, new tools for teachers allow them to better track student progress and have changed the way teachers teach and assess.

With programs such as ExamView Test Generator and Manager, teachers can build high quality assessments in which every test question is tagged with an eligible content item or learning target, and have the ability to analyze results to identify overall achievement on each eligible content item. In addition, CPS Student Response Units, used in conjunction with Smart Boards, allow students to enter test question answers directly to the test manager, providing both teachers and students with immediate feedback.

In one year of using these tools, high school PSSA math scores increased 33%. "Teachers were able to measure where each student was and they started to break into groups and provide remediation and tutors for those who were struggling," Kriner said.

The plethora of tools is especially helpful in the special education community. "We are much better suited to meet individual student needs and help each student move forward every day," Kriner said.

Cassandra Mocyk Davis is PSBA associate editor.

in Technology

Students struggling to read can listen to test questions on an iPod, recorded by the teacher. “The iPod will read the words you don’t know,” Van-Cise said. “I love using technology.” Kriner described the way this has helped level the playing field when it comes to testing. “When they hear the teacher read the question – that changes everything. Now they have the same opportunity as every other student, whereas before, if they didn’t understand the question, they weren’t even in the game,” Kriner added.

For students with behavioral issues, an improved ability to look at data and break down student performance made it clear that some students were being asked to do things in the classroom that were way beyond their ability and were subsequently acting out, Kriner said. “From a behavior point of view, we’re getting a much better understanding of where students are coming from and are better able to address those needs and give them a greater chance at being successful,” he said.

In addition, increased student engagement and appropriate instructional activities have resulted in a decrease in discipline referrals, said Sarah Tingley, elementary principal. “We’ve noticed the students are more engaged with meaningful activities and are taking charge of their own learning,” she said. “They are able to access lessons specifically designed for them based upon teachers’ assessments. It is refreshing to see the excitement and intensity in the students’ faces as they work with different technology devices and programs.”



Kriner cautions that with a multitude of technologies available, there are both pros and cons. “We have a very diverse platform and an advantage of that is we’re able to differentiate instruction in multiple ways,” he said. “We’re not just locked in to one tool, way or system. That pro probably outweighs everything else.”

He continued, pointing out that the danger lies in having too many tools that aren’t being used effectively. “If the technology isn’t used strategically, it has little to no impact on student performance.” Part of the challenge is being able to use the tools during instruction. “There are a lot of new platforms the teachers have to learn,” he said.

This is especially true in the blended schools option at Bradford Area SD, where all content is made available online but students also meet with a teacher at least once a week in a more formal, traditional setting. “Poor instruction online and poor instruction in the classroom both have the same result,” Kriner said. Using all the devices to make it hum like

a well-oiled machine is a work in progress. "We're still getting there," he said. "We've learned a great deal in the process."

That learning is the key to the success of implementing new technology. After introducing new tools, it's important to take a step back and observe what is working, what is not, and make adjustments moving forward to make sure that the changes are beneficial. In an effort to better prepare students for the global society, Bradford Area SD offered a Chinese course. Some students, however, were not ready for that learning environment. "That was one of those experiences that really helped us to understand that if we're going to move forward with these types of learning opportunities and still grow, we need to look at what skills students need to be successful," he said.

Kriner believes that the increase in students learning and working independently online has brought to surface the need to teach children autonomous learning skills and information literacy at an early age. "Students are not used to being independent and self-directed," he said. "They're used to showing up in a classroom and doing what the teacher says. It has nothing to do with student ability, but rather this is a whole new skills set they need to be taught."

The current technology offerings change so often, the ability to slow down and assess can be a difficult decision to make, but in the end it's a beneficial one. "If you keep going forward like a bull in a china shop, that's not a good plan," he said. Federal pro-

gram/grant director Lorraine Hannon added, "We have the opportunity to reflect back and see what we could do better and then continue to grow."

The supportive technology staff in the district effectively and efficiently maintain the devices, so each classroom can take advantage of the instructional tools every day, said Director of Technology John Petruzzi. "I have been creative and aggressive in finding ways to provide these tools and devices while staying within budget constraints. Working with vendors that offer extended warranties and purchasing refurbished computers to offset costs are just two examples."

Despite a difficult economy, Bradford Area SD also has seen great support from its school board. "Our board and district share a vision – to focus on the students," Hannon said. "With the budget crunch in the current year, if you look at the line items cut throughout the whole process, we cut wherever it would not hurt the students. With the board's approval, we have been able to move our technology ahead and give our teachers the ability to reach and engage all students."

Bradford Area SD Board of Directors President Timothy Bean agrees that while doing more with less is difficult, student achievement must be a priority. "We must balance fiscal responsibility with preparing our students for the future," Bean said. "As a parent and board member, I believe investing in technology is one of the best ways we can accomplish that goal." **b**

Pennsylvania School Boards Association



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Resources are available on the website, including links to many of the sources cited in the ERPC's reports, presentation slides and more. The Center will continue to produce periodic reports and white papers delving into other important public education issues.

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