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Leading With Technology

“Leading in a culture of change means creating a culture (not just a structure) of change. It does not mean adopting innovations, one after another; it does mean producing the capacity to seek, critically assess, and selectively incorporate new ideas and practices—all the time, inside the organization as well as outside it.”

—Fullan (2001, p. 44)

A SUPERINTENDENT’S JOURNEY

Lieutenant Colonel David Britten, retired following twenty-two years of military service, brought the importance of teamwork in planning and executing any mission with him to his second career as a public school administrator. He knows that effective teamwork requires that each member fully understand the vision, mission, and plan of execution from the standpoint of the role each member of the team plays in achieving success. There is no room for isolation. Failure to comprehend the role and expectations of each team member,

from the leader down to the lowest-ranking soldier, increases the risk of failure.

Those lessons have informed his leadership style as an educational administrator these past seventeen years, and technology continues to expand his ability to “lead out loud,” with a level of transparency that ensures all members of his team—administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the community—have the real-time information they need to contribute effectively to success. Social networking and blogging have given Britten the interactive tools that not only inform his decision making, but have also built a level of trust the Godfrey-Lee Public School District (Grand Rapids, Michigan) has never before experienced.

While evidence is not yet available to link real-time, interactive technology tools directly to increased academic achievement, Britten knows beyond a doubt that they have led to a change in climate and culture throughout his district that has raised the level of student learning significantly. In the nearly five years he has served as superintendent, bringing with him a broad vision of using technology tools in teaching, learning, and communicating, the community has witnessed its high school advance from one of the lowest achieving in the state to ranking in the top third of all public schools in Michigan. This has been brought about by a culture that no longer accepts the idea of low expectations for students in a poor, limited-English-speaking district, and its hybrid 1:1 and Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) technology vision has been at the core of this transformation.

Britten’s motto is “Leading out loud,” and he uses social networking and blogging to model both professional learning and transparent leadership for his administrative team. In recent years, with public education under attack by state leaders and legislators, he’s led the local effort to advocate for equity in school funding and a broader concept of college and career readiness, unabashedly using Twitter, Facebook, and his personal Rebel 6 Ramblings blog site to point out the shortcomings in state and federal policies. Britten believes

that not only have these tools become effective methods for communicating the concerns of the district regarding legislation and funding priorities, but also ensure that everyone throughout the district has real-time updates of information needed to join the effort. Using these tools appropriately and effectively models the important skills students can use as they develop their own advocacy roles.

Beyond the Godfrey-Lee District, Britten has used technology tools for his own professional learning and developing connections with educational leaders around the world. The use of Twitter in particular has led to several valuable partnerships-friendships that provide him with a convenient, real-time mechanism for bouncing off ideas and learning from others such as Pam Moran, superintendent of Albemarle County Schools in Virginia; Dave Doty, superintendent of Canyons Public Schools in Utah; and myself, principal of New Milford High in New Jersey. The professional life of an educational leader is often isolated and lonely, but technology has opened up a whole new avenue for developing learning and social relationships that can support a more successful career (Britten, 2013).

The future of educational leadership promises to become even more exciting as real-time communications through social networking and blogging combine with the expanding realm of analytics to provide administrators like Britten with more powerful, mission-focused tools. The right information focused on the needs of the moment and communicated in real time can only ensure that every member of the team contributes to student learning and organizational success.

DRIVING CHANGE

Recently, my school was recognized as the “School of the Month” for November/December by *eSchool News*. The resulting article described New Milford High School’s many accomplishments pertaining to the use of educational technology to

enhance the teaching and learning process. We are extremely proud of the culture that now exists, where technology is seen as one of many tools that are pivotal to student achievement and overall success. As technology's role in society continues to become more prevalent, it makes sense to integrate it effectively in schools so that our students are not shortchanged upon graduation.

New Milford High is a far cry from its former self. The many shifts, changes, and resulting transformation did not occur overnight, impulsively, or without calculated risks. As I look back on our journey and the path that was taken, I have been able to identify some key elements that have driven change. It was these changes that took an average, comprehensive high school and transformed it into the cutting-edge institution that many have come to know through social media over the past three years.

Three years ago, technology was viewed as an expensive frill that we would love to have but that was not worth the money when push came to shove. To me, being a technology leader meant making sure our computer labs were up to date and available for staff to use when needed. The notion of using social media was never a thought, since the perception was that it lacked any potential value for learning or education in general. As for cell phones, the only role they served was as a communication tool for students as they journeyed to and from school. Never under any circumstances would they have been used for learning during my early tenure as principal.

The above paragraph provides a brief, honest synopsis of where we were just a few years ago and the role I played in creating the exact opposite school culture described in the *eSchool News* piece. So what changed? How did New Milford become a technology-rich school where potential and promise are emphasized rather than problems, challenges, and excuses? How were we able to get everyone on board to initiate and sustain change? Here are some answers to these questions.

Connectedness Matters

It wasn't until I become connected that I truly understood the error of my ways and views. My social media journey has been well documented, but it was this journey that provided me with the knowledge, tools, and ideas needed to initiate change. Knowledge is everything, and it influences our decisions and opinions. For me, I lacked the fundamental knowledge of how technology could truly be integrated effectively. Once connected through social media, I was given the knowledge I desperately needed. For my school, connectedness was the original catalyst for change. It also enabled us to form numerous collaborative partnerships with an array of stakeholders who have assisted us along the way.

Vision

The seeds for change will only germinate if a coherent vision is established. It is important that all stakeholder groups contribute to a concrete, collective vision and work to create a plan for integration that clearly articulates why and how technology will be used to support education. Without the crucial *why* and *how*, any resulting plan will fail.

Value

One of the drawbacks to educational technology is the perceived lack of value it has in terms of student learning and achievement. With current reform efforts placing a greater emphasis on standardized test scores, the value of technology in the eyes of many has diminished or is nonexistent. The true value of technology rests on how it is used to support learning and create experiences that students find meaningful and relevant. This, in my opinion, is the key and should be included when establishing a vision. Technology has the power to engage students, unleash their creativity, and allow them to apply what they have learned to demonstrate conceptual

mastery. If stakeholders understand and experience technology's value firsthand, change quickly follows.

Support

Support comes in many forms. Teachers need to have a certain amount of access to technology in order to experience the types of changes that have occurred at New Milford High. We made a commitment at the district level to install a wireless network four years ago and have consistently upgraded it over the years to its current 100mb/s capacity. This allows for the seamless and uninterrupted use of mobile devices by both teachers and students. We also made a commitment to transform a very old building (circa 1928) by outfitting rooms with the latest technology. This was a slow process that has occurred over the past three-and-a-half years. To put some perspective on this, not one traditional classroom had an interactive whiteboard (IWB) in it four years ago. Currently, we have twenty. In addition to providing access to technology, another essential support structure is removing the fear of failure and encouraging a risk-taking environment that fuels innovation. Driving change does not happen without this element. As a leader, it wasn't until I addressed my technology fears head on and then began to model technology's effective use that many of our initiatives began to flourish.

Professional Development

Without this element in place, change surely will not occur. Transforming a school culture based on significant shifts in pedagogy requires opportunities to learn how to effectively integrate technology. As there were not many quality professional development options in place when we started our journey, we made our own. This was accomplished by leveraging our teacher leaders and available resources. The majority of the knowledge, ideas, and strategies came from the formation of a Personal Learning Network (PLN). By harnessing the power of a PLN, I was able to impart

what I learned to my staff. Trainings on various Web 2.0 tools were held after school. A year later, the Edscape Conference (edscapeconference.com) was formed to provide more relevant and meaningful growth opportunities. The most recent initiative involved the creation of a Professional Growth Period (PGP), a job-embedded growth model. This resulted in giving my staff the time and flexibility to learn how to integrate the tools that they were interested in, as well as to form their own PLNs.

Embracement

The final element that I found to be critical in driving change was empowering my staff to embrace technology as opposed to securing buy-in. To me there is a huge difference. Embracement is attained through empowerment and autonomy, as described above. Buy-in requires a salesman-like approach that might contain if-then rewards. We have no mandates to use technology at New Milford High School. Empowering teachers to shift their instructional practices and giving them the needed autonomy to take risks and work on effective integration techniques worked to intrinsically motivate them to change. This approach was found to be instrumental in our recent renaissance, minimizing resistance and resentment. Here are some guiding questions to begin the change process in one's digital leadership journey:

- How can educators and schools effectively use free social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook to communicate important information (e.g., student honors, staff accomplishments, meetings, emergency information) to stakeholders in real time?
- How can leaders take control of their public relations and produce a constant stream of positive news? If we don't share our story someone else will, and we then run the risk that it will not be positive.
- How do busy leaders go about establishing a brand presence once restricted to the business world when

schools and districts now have the tools at their fingertips to do this in a cost-effective manner?

- How can leaders connect with experts and peers across the globe to grow professionally through knowledge acquisition, resource sharing, and engaged discussion, and to receive feedback?
- How can digital leaders create policies and environments that allow educators to use free social media tools to engage learners, unleash their creativity, and enhance learning?
- Is enough being done to teach students about digital responsibility/citizenship through the effective use of social media?
- How, or are, leaders tapping into countless opportunities that arise through conversations and transparency in online spaces?
- When will the profession of education catch up to society?

During my early years as New Milford High School principal (2007–2009), I had a vastly different perspective and philosophy as to what constituted a twenty-first-century learning environment. Back then, I felt that being a tech-savvy leader just consisted of purchasing the tools for my staff and letting them use them as they saw fit. I was also adamant that social media had no place in an educational setting. To put it bluntly, no educational organizations in the country would have even thought of approaching me to talk about the innovative use of technology at my school.

We have seen many shifts in terms of instruction, communication, and learning at New Milford High, resulting in a transformative culture that is more able to meet the needs of our students. So what changed? There wasn't one really big "Aha!" moment or school epiphany, but rather small changes on the surface that have resulted in some significant changes. The first small change was my philosophical enlightenment as to the educational value of Web 2.0 technologies, including

social media. It was at this time that I saw the error of my ways and began to leverage the power of a PLN to effectively integrate an array of tools that I had never even heard of before. This small change evolved into my present philosophy on how schools can and should use social media. This short list includes

- Effectively communicating with stakeholders
- Establishing a consistent public relations platform
- Developing a brand presence that promises value
- Authentically engaging students in the learning process
- Providing cost-effective professional development that is meaningful
- Discovering opportunity for my school
- Rethinking how the learning environment was structured

The second small change was educating my staff on the value of Web 2.0 technologies in the classroom and beyond. Instead of mandating that every teacher integrate technology, I chose to empower my staff to create a stimulating learning environment. Little things such as support, encouragement, flexibility, and modeling have gone a long way to provide my staff with the confidence to take risks with technology and create meaningful learning activities that foster creativity, problem solving, and participation by all students. This is now a collaborative effort, and more and more teachers are beginning to embrace a vision that pairs sound pedagogical techniques with technology.

The third small change was realizing that students had to be instrumental in any effort to transform the culture of our school. We had to give up a certain amount of control in order to successfully implement a BYOD program where students are granted access to the school's wireless network during the day using their computing devices. We also had to trust that they would use their mobile learning devices (i.e., cell phones) responsibly as a tool for learning in certain classes using free programs such as Poll Everywhere.

The fourth and final small change was becoming a more transparent administrator and sharing the innovative practices taking place within the walls of my school. With Twitter, I have been able to give my stakeholders a glimpse into my role as an educational leader. Facebook has been an incredible tool to share real-time information, student achievements, and staff innovations. Both of these tools combined have given my stakeholders and the greater educational community a bird's-eye view into my school and the great things happening here.

These small changes, combined with many others, are beginning to have a huge impact on the teaching, learning, and community culture of my school. They are also the basis for the Pillars of Digital Leadership. Even though I have highlighted changes specific to technology, there have also been those focused on curriculum and programming. Politicians and self-proclaimed reformers routinely throw around the word *change*, and think that a one-size-fits-all approach is what's needed to increase student achievement and innovation. Each school is an autonomous body with distinct dynamics that make it unique. It's the small changes over time that will eventually leave a lasting impact. Schools and educators need to be empowered to make these changes as they see fit. These are the keys to learning with technology.

THE PILLARS OF DIGITAL LEADERSHIP

It is incumbent upon leaders to address the above questions, because they hold the key to introducing practical change to leadership and school culture. The Pillars of Digital Leadership represent a basis from which new ideas and practices evolve in order to improve schools and professional practices. Embedded within each pillar are new skills and behaviors that develop either to complement traditional models and methods of effective leadership or create entirely new pathways of doing things. Each provides a context for leaders to lead in different ways that are aligned with societal shifts

that place an increased demand on technological fluency and integration. They also connect to or fit in with existing national technology standards and frameworks for school improvement in the twenty-first century. The effective integration of readily available technology—especially social media—serves as the main foundation of each pillar. This dynamic resource, available for free to leaders, can be leveraged as a multidimensional leadership tool to spark involvement, creativity, and discussions that truly matter. Once the conversations begin, the seeds of change will quickly be planted. The Seven Pillars of Digital Leadership include

1. Communication
2. Public relations
3. Branding
4. Professional growth and development
5. Student engagement and learning
6. Opportunity
7. Learning environment and spaces

ISTE NETS•A

The Pillars of Digital Leadership are aligned to the International Society for Technology in Education's (ISTE) National Educational Technology Standards for Administrators (NETS•A) (ISTE, 2009). These represent the standards for evaluating the skills and knowledge school leaders need to support digital-age learning, implement technology, and transform the educational landscape. Transforming schools into digital-age places of learning requires leadership from people who can accept new challenges and embrace new opportunities, which is at the heart of digital leadership. Now more than ever, the success of technology integration depends on leaders who can implement systemic reform in schools. A list and description of all

the NETS•A can be found in Appendix A. Leaders can utilize the NETS•A as guidelines as they work to implement change through the Pillars of Digital Leadership. Together, these will pave the way for transformational change.

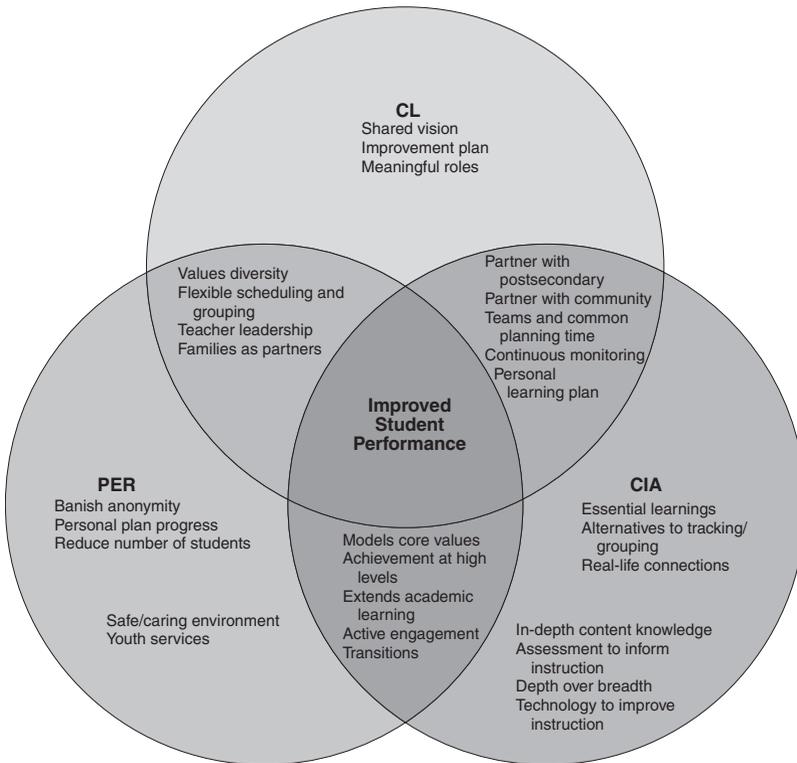
Breaking Ranks Framework

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) created a landmark framework fifteen years ago to assist leaders in making schools more student centered by personalizing programs and support systems to meet the intellectual challenges of each student. The *Breaking Ranks* Framework (NASSP, 2011) is a powerful tool for leaders, as it does not prescribe a specific model that a school must follow, but rather builds upon the individual school's data and existing culture to assess strengths and identify needs so that a customized plan for school success can be developed. The Pillars of Digital Leadership are a natural fit for the *Breaking Ranks* Framework, since each focuses on school improvement through the lens of practicing leaders.

The *Breaking Ranks* Framework has leaders focus on and address three core areas: collaborative leadership (CL); personalizing your school environment (PER); and curriculum, instruction, and assessment to improve student performance (CIA). By addressing each of these three overlapping areas, leaders can implement change to improve student performance and overall school culture. Digital leadership integrates technology and essential skill sets as the catalysts for change detailed in the *Breaking Ranks* Framework. Figure 4.1 illustrates the entire framework.

At the foundation of the interconnected *Breaking Ranks* Framework lie nine cornerstones and twenty-nine interconnected recommendations within the three core areas (collaborative leadership, personalizing your school environment, curriculum/instruction/assessment) that guide implementation of improvement initiatives. These are the foundational concepts upon which the *Breaking Ranks* Framework is built.

Figure 4.1 NASSP *Breaking Ranks* Framework



Source: NASSP (2011). Used with permission.

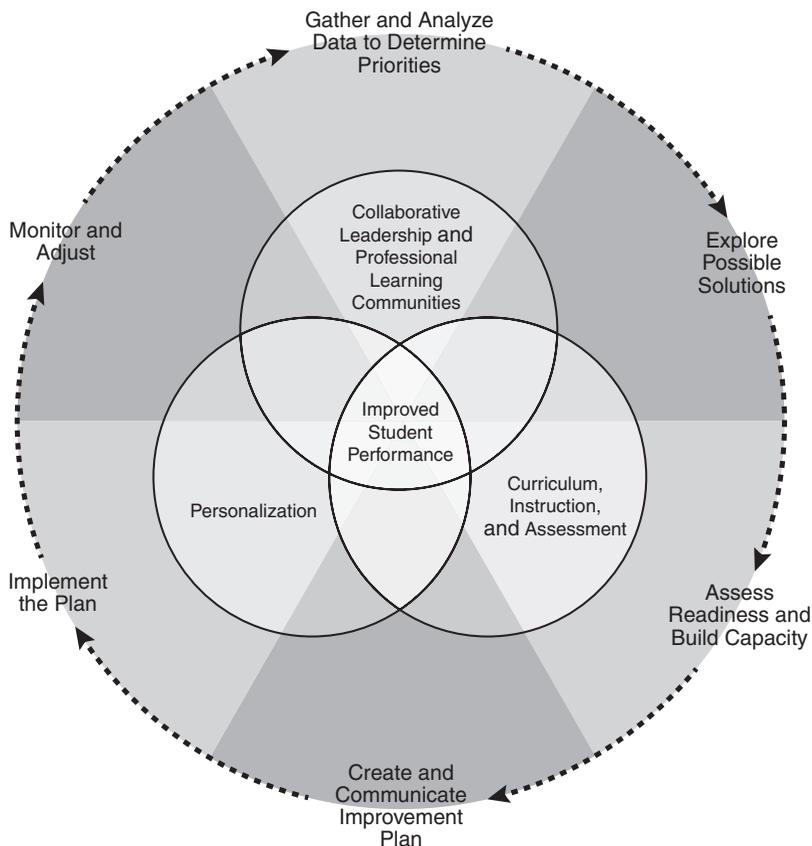
Note: CL refers to collaborative leadership; PER refers to personalizing your school environment; CIA refers to curriculum, instruction, and assessment to improve student performance.

These include leadership, professional development, culture, organization, curriculum, instruction, assessment, relationships, and equity.

It is incumbent upon leaders to determine a plan of action when integrating the Pillars of Digital Leadership as catalysts for transformational change. Leading with technology is no different than any other change process. A systematic approach that emphasizes each pillar will not only implement and sustain change at the school level but at the personal

professional level as well. The *Breaking Ranks* Framework emphasizes six stages of systematic school improvement (Figure 4.2) that will greatly assist school leaders as they integrate the Pillars of Digital Leadership. The pillars provide points of reference to improve leadership behaviors, practices, and strategies with the assistance of technology. They will also lay the foundation for rethinking how learning spaces and time are structured in order to provide more personalized experiences for all stakeholders by institutionalized autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

Figure 4.2 Six Stages of Systematic School Improvement



SUMMARY

As we move further into the digital age, it is imperative that school leaders develop a vision for the role that technology will play and establish a strategic plan for implementation across a broad spectrum. Moving from vision to action in this area can be accomplished by emulating the behaviors, techniques, and strategies utilized by highly effective technology leaders. Change in this regard requires establishing a clear vision, an inherent sense of value, embracement as opposed to buy-in, relevant professional development, and support. The Pillars of Digital Leadership provide the foundational elements to begin the process of transformational change using technological resources that perfectly align with national standards for technology leadership and frameworks for school improvement (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Standards and Framework for Digital Leadership

Digital Leadership Pillar	ISTE NETS•A	Breaking Ranks Framework
Communication	1, 3, and 5	CL ^a
Public Relations	1, 2, and 5	CL, PER ^b
Branding	2 and 4	CL
Professional Growth and Development	3	CL, CIA ^c , PER
Student Engagement and Learning	1, 2, 3, 4, and 5	CL, CIA, PER
Learning Spaces and Environment	1, 2, and 4	CL, CIA, PER
Opportunity	1 and 4	PER

a. CL refers to collaborative leadership.

b. PER refers to personalizing your school environment.

c. CIA refers to curriculum, instruction, and assessment to improve student performance.