

Leading Change in Virginia Schools: The Virginia Initiative for Technology and Administrative Leadership

by Bruce Benson, VSTE Journal Editor-at-Large

A demand for different kinds of skills and knowledge exists throughout society for citizens to be successful at work, to work with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds, and to obtain goods and services in their daily lives. Students must develop more than basic literacy competencies to succeed in the 21st century.

Students need to be skilled in communication, publication, experimentation, problem solving, knowledge and concept construction, and the use of 21st century tools. School administrators must set expectations in their school communities that demonstrate a commitment to creating innovative, integrated, and technologically rich classrooms that help students develop these 21st century skills.

In *Leading Change*, John Kotter (1996) states the importance of distinguishing between management and leadership. Kotter defines management as a “set of processes that can keep a complicated system of people and technology running smoothly” and includes aspects of “planning, staffing, controlling, and problem solving.” Kotter states that “leadership is a set of processes that creates organizations in the first place or adapts them to significantly changing circumstances. Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to make it happen.”

In the current era of high stakes testing and increased accountability for student performance, principals have clearly become instructional leaders. However, there is a need for additional leadership in the effective integration of instructional technology in our schools, a role that rests clearly with school administrators. School administrators must set expectations in the technology arena for teachers and students.

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So what is it that principals need to know, understand, and be able to do related to technology in our schools? The Collaborative for Technology Standards for School Administrators (TSSA Collaborative) facilitated the development of a national consensus on what PK-12 administrators should know and be able to do in order to optimize the effective use of technology to enhance student learning and improve school management and operation. The TSSA Collaborative identified six areas of focus for administrators, including leadership and vision; learning and teaching; productivity and professional practice; support, management, and operations; assessment and evaluation; and social, legal and ethical issues (<http://cnets.iste.org/tssa/>).

However, developing standards and putting standards into practice is another matter. We are fortunate in Virginia to have an avenue to do just that. The Virginia Initiative for Technology and Administrative Leadership (VITAL) is that avenue. VITAL is an intense professional development leadership experience in the integration of technology best practices for principals and superintendents in Virginia. The initiative recognizes the need for Virginia's educational leaders to be given rich and relevant experiences that take advantage of the power of technology to support and improve teaching, learning, and leadership in Virginia's schools.

The goal of the VITAL is to provide engaging experiences that will allow administrators to be able to:

- Lead and manage systemic whole school change processes;
- Support effective professional development;
- Attain knowledge of technology and student learning;
- Be better able to lead the integration of technology into instruction to advance student learning;
- Create and maintain technology plans that reflect sound decision making and planning; and,
- Facilitate the effective integration of technology.

Participation in VITAL begins with a school division conducting a technology-needs assessment. Once the assessment has been completed, a team including the lead trainer, superintendent, division principals, and project coordinators map out a professional development path to meet the needs of the division. To ensure relevance and long-term success, all professional development is built around principles of adult learning. In addition, VITAL professional development is geared specifically to address challenges faced by practicing Virginia administrators.

"VITAL is real training for the real job of integrating technology into every facet of school life, particularly instruction." Karen Marcus, Principal, Woodbrook Elementary School Albemarle County Public Schools, Va.

VITAL is funded in part by a grant from The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, with the Virginia Educational Technology Alliance (VETA) serving as the core fiscal agent. Developmental partners include the Virginia Department of Education, Virginia Tech, University of Virginia and the College of William and Mary. Upon completion of the program, participants receive a \$500 stipend, which may be used toward their choice of support technologies such as handheld computers, instructional software or classroom equipment.

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"[VITAL] is an excellent example of a staff development and support structure that provides administrators with the opportunity to build, and more effectively utilize, the technology skills necessary to be effective instructional leaders." Don Vale, Principal, Joseph P. Henley Middle School, Albemarle County Public Schools, Va.

Participation in VITAL is open to any practicing division superintendent or building level school principal in Virginia, including public and state-approved non-public schools or divisions. The division superintendent and principals must commit to completing the initial needs assessment, taking part in several days of professional development based on the identified needs, follow up support sessions, and carrying out to the best of his/her ability the goals identified in the program.

"This is my seventh year as an administrator in Albemarle County and I feel that I'm being challenged and stretched in ways that I have never experienced before and this is directly related to VITAL. I feel that I'm truly part of a professional inquiry based learning community where active participation and meaningful conversation takes place around issues of leadership that are crucial to what we value in Albemarle County." Michele Del Gallo, Principal, Crozet Elementary School, Albemarle County Public Schools, Va.

VITAL engages school leaders and provides a framework for learning experiences where participants learn to use technology in support of best practices in both instructional and administrative application. It is an excellent opportunity for school leaders in Virginia to define what the effective integration of technology in instructional and administrative practice looks like, develop strategies to align people with that vision, and inspire them to make it happen.

If you would like more information about participating in VITAL, visit the VITAL web site at <http://www.virginiaedleaders.org> or contact Chris O'Neal, Director of VITAL, at coneal@virginia.edu.

References

Kotter, J. (1996). *Leading change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

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