

The Vanguard of Change: Teacher Leadership in Technology

by Chad Fairey

The Technology Coordinator (as it is called in one of its multitude of incarnations) of a school bears a truly Herculean load. Part-time troubleshooter, part-time curriculum specialist, part-time administrator, and full-time superhero, the Technology Coordinator is charged with a baffling assortment of tasks, roles and responsibilities. In addition to maintaining an expansive infrastructure of technologies, the Coordinator proudly accepts the mantle of responsibility of integrating this technology into the school's instructional program. Schools and school districts across the nation continue to struggle with the boundaries of the Technology Coordinator's role, yearning for an emphasis on staff development, curriculum design and instructional leadership. Often, the Technology Coordinator is a department of one and accepts this mantle of leadership while moonlighting as the "electronic janitor." The coordinator's superhero powers are frequently enlisted to tame a savage printer, conjure up network connectivity or bestow the blessing of software upon a deprived workstation. As the vanguard of change, this solitary figure often feels the frustration of trying to leap over tall problems in a single bound.

Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) recognizes the vitality and sustaining force of localized change. If the instructional culture of a school is to be truly transformed and infused with perpetually changing technologies, then the instructional centers of the school must be the focus, i.e. Classrooms. Teachers must not only be the targets of change but also the agents of it. The Technology Coordinator must act as "first among equals," forming the first member of a leadership team that will sustain the force of change. This concept finds life in the "Vanguard Technology Integration Team" model, a district-funded initiative that supports and sustains technology reform in the middle schools of FCPS.

The Vision of Change

Originally, Fairfax County Public Schools created the Vanguard Technology Integration Teams at each of its 23 middle schools to design and implement a technology staff development program. The district initiative supported the schools by:

- providing technology planning guidelines and templates
- providing funding for eight teachers to plan or conduct staff development sessions three days per academic year

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- opening the lines of communication between district-level specialists and the eight members of the Vanguard team (via the technology coordinator)

Glasgow Middle School, a Fairfax County middle school of approximately 1200 students and 123 faculty members, has been implementing the Vanguard model for the past six years. Over this period, this model has evolved to include increased levels of teacher leadership in technology integration. In addition to assisting with the delivery of staff development, the Vanguard leadership team has become an architect of school technology policy, a strategic planning body, a technology support infrastructure and agent for change in the classroom.

A Dozen Extra Pairs of Hands

In the 2000-2001 academic year, Glasgow Middle School decided to redistribute district funding to more appropriately reflect the team structure of our school. Core curriculum is delivered via a structured teaming model at Glasgow, and the isolation of individual teams is both a benefit and challenge. While the Vanguard Team could easily point to some school-wide changes, they also recognized that significant change would more likely happen at the most local level. If waves of technology integration were to ripple throughout the school, they would start with the teams. The group also recognized another undeniable truth: technology integration was irrevocably tied to the success of technology troubleshooting and maintenance. If the technology was not working, integration was unlikely to happen.

Every academic team sends one teacher as a representative to Glasgow's Vanguard leadership team. The Technology Coordinator facilitates in-house staff development opportunities to prepare these leaders to provide quick, on-the-spot troubleshooting support for their individual academic team. The end result is that these teacher-leaders serve as a first line of defense for technology troubleshooting requests. Abiding by a firm "ten-minute rule" (since the Vanguard members are classroom teachers, they are instructed to spend no more than ten minutes on a particular issue before sending the request along to the Technology Coordinator), the Vanguard member offers teachers a local resource that can be tapped into relatively quickly and easily. As a result, the volume of troubleshooting requests that make their way to the Technology Coordinator is considerably lower than it would have been otherwise. The Technology Coordinator, staring at a mountain of requests in the face, has now been granted a dozen extra pairs of hands. Individual teachers at Glasgow embrace this model; when a technical issue arises, they have a technology leader close at hand who can immediately work to remedy the problem. Resolution time for technical problems is cut considerably.

The Great Divide

The communication divide can often grow to overwhelming proportions. The Vanguard team has increased the quality and frequency of communication one hundred-fold. Since each team of teachers is represented on the school's Vanguard leadership team, the Technology Coordinator has a reliable network through which communication is easy, fast and accurate. Through meetings, both real-time and virtual, the Technology Coordinator can disseminate critical

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information (such as changes to network logons) to the entire school in a very compressed time-frame. The communication divide has two precipices: frequency and quality. Vanguard teams help negotiate the problems of communication in that regular, two-way interaction is greatly enhanced when a teacher leadership team is in place. Faculty concerns easily find their way back to the Technology Coordinator via the in-school liaisons.

From the Horse's Mouth

Research clearly shows that teachers prefer staff development by an expert teacher who has demonstrated mastery of content and strategies. (Futrell, 1995) The Technology Coordinator, while wise and knowing about things technical, is essentially a curriculum generalist. One of the most effective products of Glasgow's Vanguard program is a relevant staff development model that puts classroom teachers in touch with those who have successfully integrated technology with instruction. At the outset of the year, the Vanguard team designs a long-range staff development plan that offers a broad range of opportunities. In addition to targeting a variety of ability levels (entry-level, advanced, etc.), the program also targets a variety of uses (productivity, integration, etc.) and disciplines (social studies, science, etc.). The teacher-leaders truly shine here, empowered with the opportunity to craft staff development based on their mastery of technology and a specific discipline. Using several venues – department meetings, team planning times, one-on-one tutoring – these teacher-leaders provide relevant staff development that is centered upon the strategies and issues of a particular content discipline. District-funding is especially helpful here; the teacher-leaders use substitute funding to provide time for co-planning and co-teaching with other teachers in their discipline.

The Leadership Council

Teacher leadership is most crucial in long-range planning and development of policy. In addition to enlisting the daily assistance of teacher-leaders for staff development, communication and troubleshooting, the Technology Coordinator should establish a roundtable where s/he is truly "first among equals." Glasgow's Vanguard team is the architect of school technology policy and a long-range planning body. The group meets three times during the academic year for strategic planning, but does not hesitate to call an impromptu meeting to resolve a pressing issue. The Vanguard members have equal voice, and group consensus is the order of the day. Members become leaders, setting agenda items and moving the discussion in a particular direction. For the Technology Coordinator, this teacher leadership is critical to success; often, Vanguard representatives uncover issues or possibilities that were completely hidden from view. Operating in a sphere outside of the teams, the Coordinator needs the eyes and ears of teacher-leaders to assess the needs of the school.

Looking Back

Enlisting teacher leadership is the best decision that a Technology Coordinator will ever make. The benefits have been briefly outlined here, but the reality is a transformation of the culture of the school and the role that technology



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will play in it. The caveat is, naturally, that it takes time. Glasgow has implemented the FCPS Vanguard model for the past six years, and only in the last two have the lasting benefits become readily apparent. Even though the school's technology inventory has nearly doubled in that time and troubleshooting requests seem more voluminous than ever, the focus on instruction has never been stronger.

References

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