

Timesavers, Collaborative Skillbuilders, and More

Tech-savvy principals learn to make the web work for them.

By Cathy Higgins

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The rhythm of a principal's day can sometimes leave little time for learning new skills. If this has been your experience, you may be feeling a bit left behind now when it comes to using technology for innovative changes at your school. Relax! It's not hard to overcome this with all the guidance and great ideas that already exist out there among your peers. Here in New Hampshire, we have principals and other administrators getting together for the Intel Teach Leadership Forum. After taking a look at the National Educational Technology Standards for Administrators (NETS-A), forum participants discuss what is possible and how they can help one another. Then they form individual action plans aligned to the five NETS-A standards. Once they identify their own short-, medium-, and long-range goals, they begin their journey to becoming "that tech-savvy principal."

Dave Backler, the principal of the Milan Village School in rural northern New Hampshire, has been facilitating some of these leadership forums. He pointed out that principals sometimes invest too much time—out of necessity—on mundane tasks during the school day, while the really important issues are left on the table for another day. In Backler's experience, tasks that used to be "time sinks" can become timesavers with the right technology tools. He focuses on easy ways to streamline his principal work, one of which is the use of online collaboration tools.

Use the web for collaboration. Set up online collaborative group sites for your committees and subgroups to record their work as they go. This will allow you to always have the latest progress updates at your fingertips. How? Once your group starts using an

online workspace for all its meeting minutes and ideas under discussion, you can log in to the group's page and read up on what has been discussed, what resources group members are using, and so on. Think of these workgroup sites or wikis as sandboxes for you and your staff members. Because they're used only for internal communications, when your group places content there, it should be considered a work in progress. No need to make it perfect for public consumption because a sandbox will get messy at times. Consider these two ideas for collaboration:

- One of the more popular—and free—collaboration tools for this is Google's suite of apps. You might use Google Groups (<http://groups.google.com>), which functions like an e-mail discussion list; Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>), which will allow you to create documents, spreadsheets, and slide presentations; or Google Sites (<http://sites.google.com>), which helps manage multiple tasks underway by a committee.
- Setting up a wiki is another option that can work well for committee work. The two most wiki tools most commonly used by educators are Wikispaces (www.wikispaces.com) and PBWorks (www.pbworks.com). Both services have some wonderful features that make it easy and efficient to create and update committee records.

Put your low-level tasks online.

There are hundreds of apps, many of them free, that can be used to make to-do lists, notes, photos, bookmarks, and more. For example, you might install the Evernote app on your iPad or other wireless device to keep notes, photos, and other files online. Doing

so allows you to access and update your notes or lists at any time and to share saved information as soon as someone asks for it—leaving you more time to focus on higher-level tasks. As Backler points out, “So many principals are just keeping their heads above water. If they just took a day to learn these tools and techniques, it would save them a day later on.”

Use online forms. Many schools now have student information systems with data on student achievement scores and other related topics. Although this can be a great help when looking at long-term data, it’s not so helpful if you need to look at behavioral or other data that really don’t fit into such systems.

Consider, for example, that eight different staff members are working with a student at different times in a day. To monitor that student’s progress, you would have to check in with each one and take notes on what they tell you about the student. That’s a lot of work. Instead, you could use the Google Forms tool in Google Docs to create a form that contains a scale with a set of performance elements. After you create the form, you give different staff members access to it so that everyone can fill out information throughout the day as needed.

Once the information is entered on the form, Google Docs automatically creates a spreadsheet so that everyone on the team has access to the same information when it’s needed. In addition, you might start to see patterns emerge in the data over time—and you would have the most up-to-date and authentic information available so that you are able to respond best to the student.

In addition, you would have the ability to customize the data collec-

tion for each student as needed. Don’t like a form? Change it with a few clicks. Need a new report? Create it in five minutes.

When you create a form to track student progress on whatever issues are needed, the data can easily be scalable and can be used with a simple Google gauge (<https://docs.google.com/support/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=1047428&topic=>). This is a great visual tool to have on screen when you are in your office talking with the student. Using the gauges for students to set goals is easy: ask them where they want to see the gauge. Then collaborate with staff members to personalize support for the student.

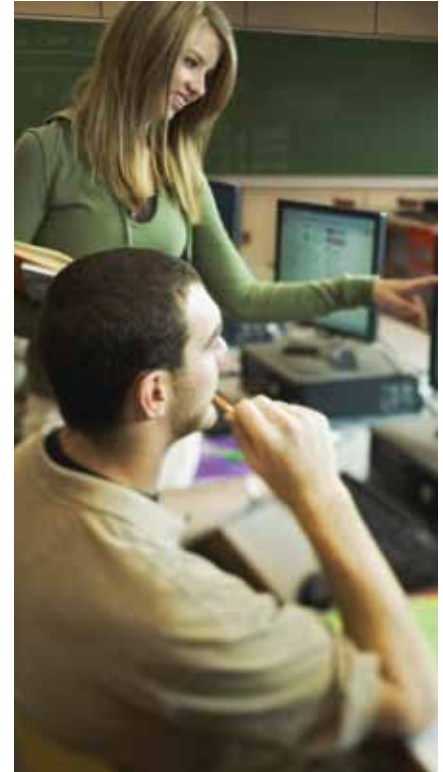
Create your own principal’s blog.

There are many excellent principal blogs that provide models for you to follow as you start your own. One New Hampshire principal, Bill Carozza, has maintained a blog for several years. When asked about best practices, his top tips were to “think before you blog” and to stick with blogging about pedagogy, trends in education, and things that parents can do to help their kids. Avoid anything that can be misinterpreted as favoring one side or another or one issue or another: such posts can easily add to any polarization that may already be surfacing in a local community.

Getting your own blog started is easy. You can get a free blog at www.edublogs.org or at www.blogger.com.

Start unblocking all that’s safe.

Too many schools are blocking far too much information because the federal Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) has produced an undue amount of fear of the unknown. It is important to be clear about what CIPA requires and what it doesn’t. Have a discussion with your technol-



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ogy team about the existing filtering mechanism in use at your school. Find out how it works and consider what you learn about your school's setup in light of what you learn from the Balanced Filtering blog. Wesley Fryer, a digital learning consultant, created it as a resource to explore legal compliance, accountability, and responsible digital citizenship in relation to web filtering in schools.

Consider the value of social media tools. What about other tools, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus? Are they better for just personal use or should they be used for professional work? In New Hampshire, the general opinion seems to be that Facebook is better used (and perhaps safer) as a social and personal online space, whereas Twitter is well suited for use as a powerful professional tool to share resources, gather ideas quickly, and learn new things from people anywhere in the world.

Lead by example. As you look at NETS-A, you will see some pretty powerful standards that relate to modern leadership. School leaders are expected to create, promote, and sustain a dynamic, digital-age learning culture;

promote an environment of excellence in professional practice; and facilitate an understanding of digital citizenship.

New Hampshire principal groups have been discussing those things and asking such questions as, What does it mean to work together online? What does it mean to be the creator of an online space? What does it mean to be a change agent? Do I know whether technology is good or bad when I see it? Are my staff members working collaboratively with the students they teach? Are they strengthening critical thinking? When I visit classrooms and see students working independently on their own devices, are they also learning collaborative skills?

Of course, some of these questions are best answered within your own group of colleagues because there are often no simple answers.

Expect collaboration. Put it online. Start blogging. Start unblocking. Lead by example. Feel more like a tech-savvy principal yourself. **PL**

RESOURCES

- Google tools: www.google.com/intl/en/about/products/index.html
- Wikispaces: www.wikispaces.com
- PBWorks Online Collaboration: www.pbworks.com
- Edublogs: www.edublogs.org
- Balanced Filtering in Schools blog: <http://balancedfiltering.org>
- Intel Teach Leadership Forum: www.intel.com/about/corporateresponsibility/education/programs/intelteach_us/program.htm
- NETS-A from the International Society for Technology in Education: www.iste.org/standards/nets-for-administrators.aspx

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