



A Districtwide Community of Learners

10 principles for guiding change when integrating
a new system for instruction and learning

BY SHELLEY BURGESS

School and district leaders across the country are working to lead one-to-one technology initiatives in their districts with varying degrees of success. I see that in my work as an educational consultant after four years as an assistant superintendent in a 7,900-student K-8 district in south San Diego.

The journey of the South Bay Union School District is one I often share. We were at a point where all of our classrooms were equipped with smartboard technology and every teacher had a laptop. However, student access to technology consisted of two or three desktop computers in each classroom, a handful of computers in school libraries and a few mobile carts in each school.

With new academic standards placing much-needed emphasis on technology integration, we knew it was time to focus on getting more digital tools into the hands of our students. This was a big change for the South Bay educators. It required us to be thoughtful and intentional about the systems of learning and support we would provide for the 450 certificated staff being

asked to do their work in a wholly different way.

From that transition, we developed 10 principles that guided us.


► **Principle 1: Identify the need for change and be clear in its purpose.**

Change needs to be purposeful and help us meet an identified need. Our school board, our community and our state standards all called for more integrated learning across the curriculum and more opportunities for students to learn in technologically rich environments.

As we gained a more in-depth understanding of what our standards were asking teachers to accomplish, the need for change and its purpose became clear. Without the new technology, we would not be able to support students in meeting learning targets.

► **Principle 2: Be deliberate about making connections to the work you already are doing.**

Few people want one more thing added to their plate. In a system committed to learning and



support, having a clear vision and focus helps sift through the thousands of initiatives we could bring to our schools and choose those directly aligned with our learning goals.

We didn't want our integrated learning initiative to be just another demand on the backs of teachers. It had to be viewed as support for the work they already were being asked to do. We deliberately positioned technology integration as a next step in attaining our literacy goals in a global society. Positioning change makes a difference, so being able to clearly articulate where it fits in the bigger picture helps the work proceed more smoothly from the start.

► **Principle 3: Set clear expectations and reasonable timelines that allow for some flexibility.**

Leaders must set expectations. If we believe in a new initiative and want all students to benefit from it, then we need to be clear that change is not optional. But we can set reasonable timelines and build in flexibility for our teams.

In our case, we set the expectation that every 4th- through 6th-grade classroom in our system would be fully functioning as an integrated learning classroom with one-to-one devices within three years but provided options of when and how to come on board within that time frame.

In year one, we asked that all 12 schools in our system have one grade-level team commit to what we called our integrated learning development team. We armed them with information on what it means to be part of a team — their roles and responsibilities, time commitment, support they would receive, etc. They

were required to meet two additional criteria:

- The entire grade-level team had to be on board. In a system of learning and support, no one should have to do this work alone, so team commitment was a must.
- Participants had to be willing to learn. From the beginning, we made clear even if you did not know the first thing about technology, we would help you learn.

Then we said, "You decide. Do you want to jump on now or wait another year or two?" Teacher teams discussed their options. In kickoff year, we had at least one team from every school, with representation from 4th, 5th and 6th grades.

We had some technology whizzes, some tech newbies and every level in between, and we started the journey together.

► **Principle 4: Anticipate obstacles and have a plan to remove them.**

Obviously, we cannot always predict what might go wrong in any initiative we lead, but we can be prepared for some of them.

One criticism of previous technology-related initiatives was that just when someone would reach a point of relying on a particular teaching tool, something would go wrong, throwing off the whole lesson plan.

In our new initiative, we committed to zero down time. We bought additional devices to be housed and fully charged in our school libraries, and we taught our library media technicians how to serve as first responders in a classroom technology breakdown. Having the extra devices and a staff member available to troubleshoot minor tech issues quickly eliminated what sometimes would be lengthy waits to fix the instructional tool. We asked teachers to commit to technology use every day, and in return we committed to ensuring the tools remained in working order.

► **Principle 5: Design the structures for learning and build learning time into the school year.**

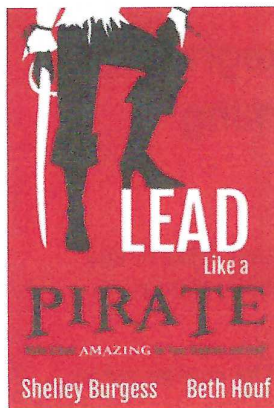
Learning organizations foster a culture of learning and collaboration, and they build time for it in the calendar. In the case of our district's integrated learning initiative, we conducted a summer learning camp of about 40 hours prior to the school year to familiarize staff with the new equipment and its proper use. We also scheduled on our district's calendar monthly full-day meetings for integrated learning development teams and conducted open labs after school for extra support.

Because all schools committed to the professional learning community model, the schools also held weekly meetings with their grade-level teams to collaboratively plan their integrated learning lessons.

► **Principle 6: Create shared learning opportunities to define what success looks like.**

When we ask people to do something new, we must collectively define what it means to be successful. What will an integrated learning classroom look like, sound like, feel like? What will be different in our classrooms this month, this year, three years from now?

We create our definition of success based on shared learning experiences. We read, we study,



we visit other schools. We learn together and use that learning to shape our definition of success. We study standards documents and other resources to get a good picture of where we might go. We use our collective learning to set our goals and define success.

► **Principle 7: Ask the question, “What do you need to learn and do in order to be successful?”**

Once we have a collective understanding of what success looks like, we then ask, “So what do we need to learn to achieve the success we just defined?” It is silly to just guess what people need. Ask them! If we have created shared learning experiences to define success, staff will know what they need to succeed. Use that information to plan the learning and support.

► **Principle 8: Choose a place to start and help people get really good at a new practice.**

Learning takes time, practice, feedback, support and reflection for people to be competent and confident in a new practice. Acknowledge that trial and error is part of the process. Don't harp on mistakes. Break new learning into manageable chunks and provide support for individuals to become proficient.

A starting point for us was helping students use the technology to produce and publish writing and to collaborate with others. Obviously, we sought many learning experiences for our students through the one-to-one tech initiative, but we picked one to start and used that to shape some of the first adult learning experiences.

Among the first tools teachers learned to use were Google Docs and Google Slides with their various features that allow student interaction and publishing.

Teacher teams planned integrated learning lessons that incorporated the new tools, taught the lessons and met weekly in their on-site professional learning community meetings to share, reflect and refine with each other. We also used the same tech tools to interact and collaborate as a larger group.

► **Principle 9: Build the capacity of your site administrators and district leaders to lead and support the change.**

I can't say enough about the importance of this step in building a learning organization in a school district. For any initiative to really stick, site leaders must understand it at a deep level, they need to get behind it, and they need to have the skills and resources to support the teachers at their sites.



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Prior to us starting our initiative, we set aside dedicated time with our principals, coaches and other school leaders to get them grounded in the work. As a leadership team, we learned to use the new tools and applied some of our work together.

Principals and coaches attended many of the integrated learning development team sessions with their teacher teams. When my team and I visited schools with principals and coaches, we observed these classrooms and debriefed them against the defined criteria for success. We wanted them to feel competent and confident coaching and giving feedback in integrated learning classrooms.

► **Principle 10: Highlight and celebrate new learning.**

In these organizations, you celebrate learning. Build in time for people to share what they have learned from others and the difference it has made for them and their students. Help create an enthusiastic learning buzz.

At the end of year one, the integrated learning development team members had shared their excitement with many colleagues in different venues and in different ways — so much so that beginning in year two, every other grade-level team wanted to participate. Even though we had planned for a three-year on-ramp, it took us two to get all 4th- through 6th-grade classrooms connected, and our 3rd-grade teachers were knocking down the doors to get on board in year three. ■

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