Technological advances in the last decade foreshadow fast-paced changes and the predominance of technology in the 21st century. As educators, we discuss software, hardware, professional development, and a host of other areas related to transforming classrooms from industrial to digital. However, leadership – how school leaders actually lead that transformation – often occurs as an afterthought or remains absent from the conversation.

So, what does it look like when district and school administrators lead an infusion of technology for teaching and learning? Here is what it looks like.

CSU East Bay’s Center for Research, Equity and Collaborative Engagement (CRECE) posed that very question when we examined Milpitas Unified School District’s blended learning implementation.

Currently, the term blended learning evokes several definitions and assumptions. For the purpose of CRECE’s study, we defined blended learning as an educational program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, path, and/or pace, while provided with an integrated learning experience (Christensen, Horn & Staker, 2013).

Blended learning can be delivered in a variety of ways, and leading a blended learning initiative requires a multi-faceted approach. Five leadership lessons emerged from this study of the Milpitas model.

**Lesson #1: Foster a culture of exploration**

An edict from the district office with rigid specifications for each classroom simply won’t address the unique needs of each school, and more importantly, each student. Calling upon Daniel Pink’s (2009) work regarding motivation, Milpitas Superintendent Cary Matsuoaka referred to his approach as “defined autonomy.” He encouraged school site administrators and teachers to determine the best blended learning model and implement...
tion timeline for their individual school sites. Hence, different models and varying levels of implementation exist within the school district. This runs contrary to the top-down, one-size-fits-all process often experienced when school districts attempt to implement instructional technology.

The old adage, “One size doesn’t fit all,” certainly applies to technology implementation in schools. Schools often differ greatly in one school district, particularly in large K-12 districts encompassing multiple neighborhoods, or even different cities. Flexibility for site administrators and teachers fosters a culture of exploration, and supports their acquisition of knowledge as they make decisions relevant to the best use of technology at their specific school.

However, defined autonomy can be challenging. One district-level administrator described her discussion with the superintendent when she expressed her initial trepidation in the absence of a prescribed mandate for all school sites. She told the superintendent that she “needed a plan,” and at first, worried that she couldn’t “check off the boxes” for each step of the way.

While causing some initial anxiety among school and district leaders, they cited the flexibility offered by the superintendent as critical to the successful technology implementation. In essence, without allowing each school site to develop the nuances of a blended learning model to fit their site, and without the freedom to move at their own pace, the district’s blended learning implementation would have been doomed before its start.

Lesson #2: Differentiate professional development

Leaders must carefully consider the technology acumen and readiness of staff to determine the best timeline and methods of implementation at each school site. Differentiation serves as an effective tool for all learners, including adults. Administrators must consider and respect the wide spectrum of technological skill among classroom teachers.

Even digital natives – those teachers who grew up with cell phones and laptops – demonstrate different ability levels as they attempt to use technology for teaching and learning. In the words of one principal, “As much as I want to say: ‘Let’s go, let’s go,’ I do need to remember that everyone is in different places.”

A healthy respect for differentiation defines Milpitas’ approach to professional development. All teachers who use the district’s selected software for adaptive mathematics and English-language arts instruction and data collection attend designated training for that program, but other professional development is determined by the ongoing needs of teachers.

For example, this past summer teachers selected from a menu of professional development offerings. Additionally, principals indicated that when a teacher requests additional training, or they see a teacher struggling with technology implementation, they make every effort to provide timely and appropriate support. That support may range from attendance at trainings beyond district offerings to simply pairing the teacher with a knowledgeable colleague.

Lesson #3: Define the purpose

Milpitas administrators repeatedly articulated the purpose for the district’s blended learning implementation: increase student success by actively engaging all students in their learning, and inform teachers with data to improve instruction. “Explore and fail fast,” was a phrase used by Superintendent Matsuoka, thus creating a sense of urgency in addition to fostering a culture where site administrators and teachers are encouraged to try technology on for size, and determine the best fit for their students.

Although teachers and school-level leaders are free to explore and experiment to determine the optimal delivery of blended learning for their sites, Matsuoka initially established a purpose for the district’s blended learning implementation. More than a mission or vision – terms often referenced in a discussion of leadership – communicating the purpose for technology led to actual implementation in the classroom.

Blended learning isn’t the latest instructional fad or the superintendent’s passing fancy; there’s a higher moral purpose. Matsuoka called upon educators to use a 21st century tool to make a difference in teaching and learning, and equip students with skills for the future.

Lesson #4: Communicate far and wide

The blended learning implementation in Milpitas doesn’t differ from any new initiative that benefits from a well-conceived and deliberate communication plan. Thinking through the various audiences, timeline, content, and modes of delivery proved essential as an identified sequence of board members, administrators, teachers, parents, and community members learned about the purpose for blended learning.

For example, within minutes after talking about blended learning with the largest group of teachers accessible at the start of the school year, Matsuoka emailed a district-wide message, thereby avoiding misinformation and rumor. Moreover, actions became as important as words to communicate a “We’re all in this together” attitude.

The district’s technology director noted that the superintendent uses the various software and hardware introduced in the district, thus becoming a learner of the technology prior to or along with everyone else. All administrators spoke about modeling, demonstrating their own risk-taking, or acting as technology “pioneers” in tandem with teachers.

With a concerted focus on internal communication, it might have been easy to overlook one of the most important audiences: parents. Instructional technology is virtually uncharted territory for many parents, and just as teachers have a range of familiarity with technology, so do parents. Some are delighted when they can see their child’s progress online, while others shy away, or may not have access to the Internet.

One principal told us she held parent
meetings to explain blended learning, demonstrate the students’ experiences, and answer parents’ questions about the implications for instruction, or allay their fears about student security on the Internet. Although a survey revealed that only a small percentage of families do not have a home Internet connection, helping those parents obtain an Internet connection or offering a traditional option for parent communication remains a challenge.

Lesson #5: Provide infrastructure and resources

Milpitas school leaders cited the necessity of a reliable infrastructure to support ease of use among students and teachers. As one principal described it, “Five years ago we were in ancient civilization as far as technology … we did not have wireless [in the classroom].” Committing to an infrastructure that supports blended learning, the district went from 15 wireless access points in the district to more than 650 in less than two years. How did the district accomplish that? Matsuoka indicated that he did not move forward with any type of blended learning implementation until he hired a knowledgeable and experienced technology director who developed a reliable and secure infrastructure.

Repeatedly, administrators acknowledged the technology department’s leadership and clearly planned efforts as primary factors contributing to the implementation of blended learning in the classroom.

Using technology tools for 21st century learning requires resources, and district leaders must examine student, teacher and administrator needs specific to their district. No two districts will require the same technological resources and support.

Barely surfacing from one of the most difficult financial times in California public schools’ history, administrators may shudder to ask, “How much is technology going to cost?” and “Is it worth it?” As the Milpitas model illustrates, the answer to the second

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The question is easy. Yes, technology is worth it. Simply reflect back to that higher moral purpose of using technology to ensure students’ successful futures and you have your answer.

The first question – how much will it cost? – is more complex. However, as districts recover financially, a well-conceived technology plan must be at the top of the list. While California’s K-12 educators struggled with the recession, technological advances and more information about teaching and learning continued; therefore, it’s time to re-think past technology expenditures in comparison to what’s needed for the future.

Certainly, the Local Control and Accountability Plan spurs re-prioritization of funding, while creating or re-defining business partnerships and acquiring grant funding offer other resources for technology.

Leadership for the digital era

Just as teachers grapple with transforming industrial age classrooms to 21st century learning environments, school administrators must call upon already acquired skills and gain new knowledge necessary to lead that transformation.

CRECE’s study of Milpitas Unified School District’s blended learning implementation affirmed time-tested successful leadership actions such as purposefully communicating, creating reliable infrastructures, and providing resources. However, just as classrooms are different in the 21st century, our leadership must be different.

Clearly defining the purpose – explaining why we need technology in our classrooms – may be at least as important as creating a vision or mission. Understanding the vast continuum of technological skill among educators, and applying the principles of differentiated learning to their professional development, will create the confidence and skill necessary for teachers to pioneer technology in the classroom.

And finally, allowing for flexibility in the form of defined autonomy will encourage the creativity and risk-taking necessary among teachers and school site leaders as they design and implement technology that prepares students for future success.

References