



Instructional Coaches Sparking Change

By Brad Wilson

Who supports teachers in your school during the ongoing shift to student-centered, digital classrooms?

As Michigan districts are increasingly adopting technology as part of the main tool set for classrooms, a growing cadre of leaders is rising to meet the demand for curriculum integration support. A shift in focus away from the devices is leading to a variety of job descriptions that have never before existed. By hearing from experts about their local models and experiences, we're able to get a picture of the needs, challenges, and implications for the future.

A changing climate of education

When Fraser Schools began planning to implement a 1:1 initiative in 2011, they convened a committee of teachers and administrators to discern what the educational environment would need to look like in order to be successful. "We met for a year and didn't talk about the device or the technology," recalls Kris Young, Director of Educational Technology and Information Systems. Instead, curriculum redesign, pedagogy and student engagement drove the conversation. The group determined that a strong teacher support model was critical to the success of the program. The resulting "21st Century Literacy" teaching positions combine classroom responsibilities with instructional coaching roles. These educators spend part of their week mentoring colleagues through training and modeling the possibilities that new resources have presented.

Chris Stanley explains, "Our job is to show that technology creates unlimited opportunities for learning." He is one of eleven 21st Century Literacy teachers who "spend quite a bit of time focusing on the lesson design process." Their expertise with both pedagogy and technology integration, matched with a passion to help others and

drive change, is a perfect match. "I love brainstorming with teachers to see how new tools best fit into their lessons," Chris said. For example, he recently worked side by side with a teacher to create an online discussion board that served as an "engaging lesson opener".

No matter their job title, innovators like Chris are helping to solve a clear problem that is not isolated to Michigan. The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has shown that "many teachers do not know how to design technology-rich learning environments." It's a blunt fact— an issue of teacher quality that needs to be addressed if schools are going to provide essential educational opportunities.

Getting creative with staffing

Tina Tribu, an Instructional Technologist from the Kalamazoo RESA, has seen districts in her region recognize the need for teacher coaching, and in response create or modify positions to fill those gaps. Like at Fraser, several of these assignments include teachers who are charged with providing professional development and leadership for part of the week. This could be evidence of Michigan keeping pace with a growing national trend of "Teacherpreneurs". Defined as instructors who "lead but don't leave," schools are empowering them with the time and space to pursue and spread innovation both locally and beyond. Core to this concept is the belief that "the challenges facing our public schools cannot be met with all teachers serving in the same narrow roles designed for a bygone era"¹.

The direction of traditional library and media resources is also shifting, and utilizing educators who have adapted to the modern ecosystem can be a viable option for district-provided professional

development. Media Specialist jobs are being converted to include more educational technology support in Tribu's area and around the state. These districts are relying on qualified staff to do training for device rollouts, lead online initiatives, and support the transition to mobile learning.

Call us what you will

Commonly referred to as Instructional Technologists or Technology Coaches, there are just as many names as there are variations in how districts are structuring these positions. Jeremie Coplin, an Instructional Technology Specialist for Constantine Public Schools sees his job as that of a coach. "My work is designed to help teachers intertwine best practice with technology into their daily lesson plans." He accomplishes this through one-on-one, small group or large group professional development.

In Midland Public Schools, Chris Sabourin is a Technology and Media Curriculum Specialist who also blends together several different PD structures and offerings for the teachers he supports. He does quick online video tutorials, after school workshops, pull out trainings for "items identified as critical" and oversees a group of "Building Instructional Technology Leaders". This group of educators meets monthly and also gets some release time to learn with Chris about new methods for promoting student achievement. While it's difficult to get hard numbers on how many districts are adopting new instructional support positions in Michigan, there are dozens who have been discovered in researching for this article.

Coaching

When teachers do not effectively integrate technology into their practices, students "miss out on authentic learning experiences emphasizing collaboration, creativity, and innovation"². This is an unacceptable outcome for our students, but it will take more than rhetoric to help educators rise to the occasion. Ron Houtman, Educational Technology Consultant for the Kent ISD, is seeing that teachers want "hands-on, experiential learning with an expert coach," and notes that savvy tech coaches make sure these efforts are coordinated with the school improvement plan and student outcomes.

But there are significant challenges to implementing a coaching model — namely time and money. "The capacity is there," he explains, "but without the backing of time and money, it's tough." His area has actually seen a decrease in Ed Tech professionals due to budgetary constraints, which has left the ISD team in high demand as districts scramble to integrate the devices that have been purchased. Coplin believes that it starts with administration. "Superintendents need to see and understand how detrimental the position is to overall achievement." It's up to the school leaders to carve out time for the growth to happen, with some like Constantine integrating it into their Professional Learning Community (PLC) models.



The Jackson County ISD Ed Tech Team works daily with 17 local districts as part of a technology consortium. They focus on instructional best practices and student-centered learning. Here, Dan Spencer coaches a small group of teachers from Jackson.

As technology becomes a ubiquitous part of education, no longer do 'one and done' PD days cut it, and the ISTE Coaching white paper describes how "coaching, combined with communities of learning, is a highly effective job-embedded PD model." Coplin, previously a Kindergarten teacher, sees a big opportunity for "teachers stepping up who aren't afraid to change the culture, share and help others." Using the ISTE Standards for Coaches and Teachers as a foundation for his work and trainings, the consistent presence of a coach provides both the vision and the specialized guidance to make a lasting transformation.

Both innovation and survival

Kris Young, MACUL's 2013 Technology Coordinator of the Year, has seen her role shift in recent years, "from managing software and systems to working hand in hand with curriculum to integrating technology into the classroom." She believes the shift is being driven by the need to personalize education and that technology departments need to move away from an "old mindset" to one that always asks, "What's best for teaching and learning?" Tribu would agree. "Technology and curriculum departments need to align their efforts to embed tech into teaching practices, rather than teaching the tool." She is quick to point out that today's classroom technology is less and less about productivity and teacher-centered classrooms. She sees coaches helping teachers use the tools for deeper understanding and construction of knowledge.

Access to information, digital creation options and the ability to connect with others has spurred a new (and ever-changing) landscape for learning, one that has major implications for how effective classrooms will look. "Today's students have different expectations for the educational experience and we need to meet those," challenges Houtman.

The realities that students will face when they leave K-12 have been driving factors for why Chris Sabourin's job exists. "Colleges and employers expect graduates to have knowledge of tools and be able



Jeremy Badiner is part of a team of 3 instructional technologists at Gull Lake Schools. They have worked with K-12 staff to integrate more than 2,700 mobile devices into the classrooms.

to apply them,” he stated. His district has been trying to stay current with those demands as well as keep up with changes in legislation that are forcing schools to have more online learning options. The decisions that administrators have had to make in order to carve out room in their budget for new positions have been tough, but Young easily validates them. “Seeing students engage, learn and progress daily makes it all worthwhile.”

Bringing together the vision

While the field continues to mature, the voice of teacher leaders and coaches will need to be heard in order for collaborations at the regional and statewide level to flourish. The ISTE Coaching standards clearly validate this need, calling on these educators to “inspire and participate in the development and implementation of a shared vision.” Tribu recommends that local coaches partner with ISDs/ESAs to access resources and professional networking. Taking a stance of openness and cooperation will help all Michigan students, and Sabourin points out the need for “a strong network of folks willing to share successes and issues.”

role. No matter where people connect, participation in the growing network will help everyone involved leverage the experiences of others during this exciting time.

Adapt or become obsolete

As for districts that don’t follow an intentional process of visioning and teacher guidance? The ‘we’ve got our devices...now what?’ approach has led to many unfulfilled promises of technology and to very expensive ‘digital worksheets’. With increasing emphasis on creativity, STEM, Project-Based Learning and other modern educational innovations, the stand-alone technology discussion will become obsolete in successful cultures. “We will see much more that learning isn’t controlled by the teacher,” points out Houtman, “it’s facilitated and coached.” Chris Sabourin predicts that “technology will become seamless...ed tech will become

part of school leadership...it will be an expectation for everyone.” The mounting evidence seems to be that these practices will no longer be optional.

As instructional coaching becomes embedded in curricular delivery, devices will become invisible. Apps will become invisible. Only teachers who have learned how to blend technology, content knowledge and pedagogy will be considered effective (see TPACK framework). Only administrators who provide ongoing support for change and are willing to model new strategies will be considered to be relevant. Only technology departments who have aligned their efforts with teaching and learning will still be around.

Every year, teachers are being asked to do more with less. But providing less time for sustained growth of their practice should not be an option. Lack of ongoing support for new tools and strategies should not be an option. To ensure the school environment for Michigan students is able to successfully meet their learning needs, we must embrace the role of the Coach.

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Kris Young: @KrisYK12
Ron Houtman: @RonHoutman
Tina Tribu: @TribuTM
Jeremie Coplin: @JermCo820
Chris Sabourin: @SabourinCP

A blended approach to connecting coaches is emerging, and online platforms like Twitter and Google Plus can help individuals overcome the isolation of being the ‘one’ or ‘few’ gurus in their district. Houtman reminds us that on social media, “great conversations are happening and practical ideas are being posted every day.” In addition, events like the annual MACUL Conference can provide a face-to-face meeting for those around the state who find themselves in a coaching

Berry, Barnett. *Teacherpreneurs: Innovative Teachers Who Lead but Don't Leave*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013.

²Beglau, M., Hare, J.C., Foltos, L., Gann, K., James, J., Jobe, H., Knight, J., and Smith, B. (2011) *Technology, coaching, and community: Power partners for improved professional development in primary and secondary education*. International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE): Eugene, Oregon.

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