Accelerate Professional Learning

Adopting a new perspective on professional development can help build a culture of change among educators as they embrace new technology and new teaching tactics.
Student-centered learning approaches are becoming more prevalent in school systems and technology plays a critical role in scaling this approach. This allows for deeper student engagement and learning. Ultimately, though, the success of these efforts depends on school leaders’ ability to reboot their mindsets and their teachers’ educational practices. That requires building a consensus and creating a workable and scalable culture of change.

A well-designed professional learning experience can go far toward accelerating instructional leadership among classroom teachers and site administrators. Achieving this momentum, however, requires collaborative, accessible, frequent and relevant learning opportunities. Districts need to shift professional learning delivery from the traditional four times a year to professional learning that happens as much as four times a day.

This THE Journal whitepaper explores how two school districts worked with Dell EMC’s Professional Learning Services to help their educators create the collaborative, creative and student-centered environment every student deserves. The two districts profiled here—one a pioneer in the use of 1-to-1 devices in the classroom and the other much newer to the pervasive use of educational technology—share their lessons for building a culture of change that’s both sustainable and scalable through regular professional learning sessions.

Convert Professional Development to Professional Learning

Henrico County Public Schools in Virginia has 50,000 students and 3,800 teachers. Fifteen years ago the district began its innovative transformation to a 1-to-1 initiative. Lake Travis Independent School District in Texas has 9,200 students and 750 people in education roles. About three years ago, this district began rolling out a bring-your-own-learning-technology (BYOLT) program, supplemented with in-school carts of tablets and laptops.

Although these two districts vary in size and their approach to technology integration, they have a great deal in common regarding how they’ve moved from standard professional development (PD) to inventive professional learning (PL) to help their teachers prepare for new classroom practices. Throughout that journey, Dell EMC’s Professional Learning Services has helped each school system accelerate their efforts.

The results of a study conducted by the Pew Research Center found three-quarters of teachers surveyed believe digital tools and the Internet “have added new demands to their lives” and have increased the “range of content and skills about which they must be knowledgeable.” Both PD and PL are supposed to be the linchpins that connect those skills gaps to the training teachers need in order to integrate the use of technology in the classroom effectively.

Yet, while 9 out of 10 teachers participate in PD activities every year, according to a 2009 study by researchers from Stanford University and the National Staff Development
Counsel (now named Learning Forward), fewer than half found their PD "to be of much value." In fact, as one think tank expressed it, most PD ends up being "short-term, episodic, and disconnected." As the Stanford/Learning Forward report points out, PD has more lasting power when the programs have "greater intensity and duration." That gives the teacher more time to learn and utilize the new practice and uncover implementation problems while there's still time to fix them. In other words, PD needs to become PL.

What's the difference? Just as the concept of "teaching" has given way to the idea of "student learning," so too has professional development evolved into professional learning. Although this may seem semantic, the differences go deeper. PL is the umbrella term for a broader, more comprehensive and deeper educational effort. Most of what occurs is labelled as PD and is simply training. Unfortunately, the outcomes are often not the same. Training has a defined outcome of changing teacher practice by showing a new strategy or how to use a tool. PL starts with defined student outcomes, is process based, and designed to meet individual needs. To be effective, school districts should strive to ensure their PL model matches the learning model they want for students.

**Getting out of the Rut at Henrico**

Fifteen years ago when the Henrico County Public School district kicked off its 1-to-1 initiative in its high schools, the district placed an instructional technology resource teacher (ITRT) in every secondary school. This teacher was responsible for the PD and training related to the project.

Debra Roethke was one of the first ITRTs and now serves as the assistant director for instructional technology. "Nobody knew what a laptop was. All we did was teach teachers how to use the computers and programs to elevate that comfort level they needed to have," she says of those early days. In time, the trainers realized they were stuck in a rut. "We were not really helping change the state of instruction to the extent we wanted to."

That changed when the new director of professional development collaborated with the Dell EMC consultant to push the ITRTs to begin asking, "What does a 21st century classroom look like?" Opinions were all over the map, says Roethke. "We realized that even in our own department we didn’t really agree on what that should look like. We didn’t have any common language or vocabulary around it."

The newly formed division of staff development instructional technology spent a year designing what a classroom in Henrico could look like in more general terms. "It wasn’t about this specific technology—but about being able to use it in the appropriate way," she says.

To help its teachers understand how those three fundamental elements—pedagogy, content and technology—fit together, the district adopted a simple TPACK diagram from education technology expert Punya Mishra’s work. "It basically says that in order to have an excellent 21st century classroom, you have to have good instruction, you have to know your content, and there has to be technology," she says.

The TPACK model expresses the three most important elements of a "great" classroom. From that diagram, the district developed a rubric to help teachers understand the stages of their own instructional maturity (as well as their students' learning growth). Titled the "Teaching Innovation Progression Chart," (pronounced “TIP-C” in the district), the rubric covers four kinds of learning:

- Research and information fluency
- Communication and collaboration
- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Creativity and innovation

These aren’t so different, she points out, from the "five Cs" currently used by many districts to describe the skills they consider crucial to 21st century learning. Those frequently (but not always) consist of citizenship, collaboration, communication, critical thinking and creativity. The TIP-C rubric, says Roethke, became the starting point for the Henrico County Public School district’s approach to professional learning.
point for “how we began changing instruction at Henrico.” Over the last seven years, HCPS has supplemented this framework with Henrico 21, a repository of high-quality curriculum created by its teachers and available to the worldwide education community.

There are specific goals and learning activities for both teachers and students for each area at each stage of learning. These cover not just the technology used, but also the learning involved. For example, student activities for communication and collaboration include selecting the appropriate digital tools for collaboration and reflecting on their individual roles as collaborators.

The Coaching Model
Henrico used the rubric to kick off a program called “Reflective Friends.” The idea was each school running 1-to-1 was asked to pick its 10 best 21st century teachers. “We told them, ‘We’re going to come observe your classroom. We’re going to tell you when we’re coming. We want a dog-and-pony show. We want to see the best you have to offer,’” says Roethke. At the same time, they selected 10 random teachers within each school. Although they were told about the visits, they didn’t receive any special help preparing. Along with those classroom visits, a team of people from Roethke’s department and Dell EMC professional learning consultants interviewed groups of teachers and students. Then they analyzed the entire data set and came up with TIP-C baseline determinations for each of those educators.

Six months later, the team returned for another set of observations—this time with a more manageable observation group of six “select” teachers and six “random” teachers. In each subsequent year, they tweaked the process. The next year the select teachers knew about the visits, but the random teachers didn’t. The year after that, everybody was told they needed to be ready for a possible visit on a specific day. Typically, the teams would fan out at different schools and the classroom visits would last for about 40 minutes.

In between visits, the ITRTs work one-on-one with the teachers. The ITRT helps model a lesson or particular technology-embedded activity in the classroom, and the teacher observes. Then the coach and teacher co-teach the lesson, which is modeled on how technology empowers the students throughout the learning process. The coaching cycle is fluid and intentional, with the coach observing and sharing feedback.

An important outcome from these Reflective Friends visits was a detailed report, complete with recommendations for each host school. This data provided school and district leadership teams with feedback on how to personalize PL efforts at the respective campuses and validate the hard work and collaboration that deepened student learning over time. In the hands of capable, forward leaning leadership teams, this information has proven highly useful and strategic.

The original plan was to start with a dozen teachers per coach, but that was unworkable. “To really make a change in somebody’s practice, the coaches have to be with the teachers a lot,” says Roethke. The district has since cut that down to between three and six teachers per ITRT each school year.

SELECTING TEACHERS FOR COACHING
The people selected for the program are picked in different ways. “Sometimes the principal says, ‘I really want you to work with these teachers.’ Some of the schools went by grade or subject.” But throughout, Roethke’s team and the Dell EMC consultants works with the principals to make sure they understand that the teachers they work with are the ones who are interested. “If they want to, then they change. If they don’t want to, it’s not going to happen.”

“We did that for three years and we definitely saw growth,” she says. “Honestly, we made more progress in changing instruction in the classroom in those three years than we had in the five years before that.”

— Debra Adams Roethke, assistant director of instructional technology

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The Reflective Friends program has now diminished as a district-wide practice, not because it didn’t work, but because it worked so well. “The reason we don’t do it to the
extent we had is because schools have taken it over," says Roethke. "Schools do all kinds of things."

The district investment in Reflective Friends is now producing sustainable responses among elementary, middle and high schools. The PD made available to site leaders through Reflective Friends has produced threshold capacity for sustainability across select elementary, middle and high schools.

She mentions one school that uses a color code outside their doors. "If it's green, you know you can come in any time you want to." Those teachers try to do two or three observations of each other every nine weeks. "Then they'll leave a little note on the door for the teacher when they leave, giving suggestions and positive feedback."

**"What Can You Do to Help Us?"**

Just as Henrico was getting its arms around new concepts and practices to inspire teacher learning, a Texas school district was undergoing a similar journey. Job one for Lake Travis Independent School District, which was ramping up for a bring-your-own-learning-technology (BYOLT) program, was preparing to support students who brought their own devices by strengthening its network infrastructure. It needed to increase network capacity to support hundreds (or thousands) of students in any one location working on their own or school-provided laptops and tablets.

As the Technology & Information Systems Services organization under Executive Director Chris Woehl was adding access points and upgrading switches and appliances, the new Director of Learning & Teaching Liz Sims was working with her staff to identify the real "trailblazers." These are teachers "on the cutting edge trying to use what they had."

The district had a long-time relationship with Dell EMC on the hardware side. Woehl asked the company, "What can you do to help us? We know it's not just the technology but how you can use it." Dell EMC's response, says Sims, was to bring in its experts to help her develop a new PL approach. The new approach relied on the same elements Henrico developed with the guidance of Dell EMC—specifically TPACK and TIP-C. However, the results took a different form at Lake Travis.

In the second year of that digital transformation, Sims was given the opportunity to reorganize her department and hire a handful of learning and teaching "coaches." These coaches would work with this group of next-generation teachers and help them "take risks" they might otherwise avoid.

Together, Lake Travis and Dell EMC created a competency-based coaching model and job-embedded learning for teachers. The plan was similar to Henrico's, in that coaches worked with individual teachers to strengthen their instructional practices. However, these new coaches themselves needed special training themselves.

Consultants recommended by Dell EMC helped the district strategically formulate its PL processes. For example, those external experts were part of conversations with principals to explain what the coaches would be doing in the classroom and what the schools could hope to gain by participating. At the beginning of year two, Dell EMC experts helped Sims and her coaches learn how they could expand their roles in learning and teaching, and how to use the competency model with TIP-C.

**That's What Growth Looks Like**

From there, the work evolved into a round-robin orchestration. A second group of teachers began their coaching process as the first cohort worked.

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### Advice from the Districts

Establish a common language framework. Discuss the PL practices, objectives and outcomes to ensure everyone is aligned in their goals and how they discuss those goals. Sims works with those school leaders to help them understand that by helping the teachers grow, they’ll be able to "reach their goals and their mission and get their vision implemented."

Include your principals in the process. Teachers won’t be risk-takers, says Sims, “unless their principals on the campus are supportive of that.” She works with those school leaders to help them understand that by helping the teachers grow, they’ll be able to “reach their goals and their mission and get their vision implemented.”

Start with your trailblazers. Focus on those teachers most eager to embrace this type of PL. At Henrico, the district originally tried to ensure every teacher had the tools they needed and the professional development required to exploit those.

Take a staged approach. Early on, Henrico threw "so much stuff" at its teachers at one time, nothing stuck. "You really have to have a very well-defined, scaffolded approach to doing anything," she says. Their broad plan wasn’t really moving them forward before Dell EMC worked with her team to develop the TIP-C rubric.

Use targeted experts. While there are myriad education experts, school resources are always limited. Make sure you target the kind of help you need and ask for it. In her experience with Dell EMC, for example, if the topic is authentic assessment, "they have somebody they recommend we work with. They have an expert who is incredible with urban literacy. They have another expert who’s great on coaching. We can explain to them what we need and we can really plan together. It’s a true partnership."
received differentiated support. Year two teachers wanted to stay in touch with their coaches, but for specific aspects of their activities, such as redeveloping particular units or working within a team of like-subject teachers. The goal, says Sims, is “gradual release.”

“Depending on where you’re at, I’m going to give you a lot of support or come in at times when you need it. And then we’re going to step back. You know we have a good relationship, so you call me if you want me to come back in,” she says.

Sims wanted to “embed that first cohort into campus leadership,” so they were brought in to help with professional learning activities. They served as some of the expert presenters for a new district-wide teacher technology conference, for example. Even from the first year of that conference to the second year, the district experienced obvious growth, says Sims. There was initially quite a bit of apprehension among the 700 teachers. When a teacher couldn’t figure out how to log in or where to go to find the learning management system, other teachers would jump in and say, “You just click here.” Then the questions soon became more qualitative. That, she says, is how transformation happens. Some teachers were even tweeting, “I’m going to try something I just learned how to do. I can’t wait to get into my classroom.”

Next fall, the first cohort will enter its third year. Sims’ team is working with principals to help them understand how they can use these “model” teachers on campus to help sustain this development. The message is, “They don’t become the coach. They don’t have the time. They become teacher-leaders on your campus.”

To monitor the progress, Dell EMC consulting partner Advanced Learning Partnerships worked with Lake Travis to co-develop processes and metrics that offer insight on the impact job-embedded coaching has on instructional decision-making. Teachers record reflections about their practices that coaches use to guide their one-on-one conversations. Then Sims’ division uses the metrics at the end of the year to get a sense of teacher growth.

Lake Travis also relied on Dell EMC’s experts to help the school system “create the narrative of the district story,” says Sims. The results have helped maintain momentum, especially as new education leaders come into the district. They’re brought up to speed on where teachers were before their next-generation learning processes, where they are now, and how they’ve achieved that growth.

Dell EMC’s consultants have also worked with the district's coaches to “develop authentic assessments and thinking about how you would help coach teachers into tweaking some of the things they do to be more authentic,” says Sims. Based on those efforts, “We now have teachers working on authentic learning projects.”

Learning is a Shared Process

Throughout the transition of professional development to professional learning, education leaders at both Lake Travis and Henrico continue to see a cultural shift among their teachers. “It’s not exactly where we want it to be,” says Sims. “The goal is not to get to the end of the continuum. It's just can you bump it up a little? We know we're not done yet.”

Working with Dell EMC and its corps of experts helped both districts see how to work with their teachers and school leaders to make continuous and incremental changes in their instructional practices. This helps their students learn in more engaging and collaborative ways. “That’s one of the things that Dell EMC and [its partners] are so good at,” says Roethke. “They bring in new ideas—and not just their ideas, but new ideas they’re seeing all over the country. I’m always looking for things like that we can learn from other people.”

For more information, visit www.dell.com/k12 and www.dell.com/professionallearning.

“We now have teachers working on authentic learning”
— Liz Sims, Director of Learning & Teaching at Lake Travis ISD
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