

Like many senior administrators, Anita Townsend, Principal of Curriculum K-12 for the Simcoe County District School Board strives to provide teachers with the Information Technology (IT) tools they need to prepare themselves and students for the 21st century classroom.

“It is difficult,” she says, “because they (teachers) have to change some of their teaching methods and need a level of support that we can’t always afford.”

But then, earlier in 2008, Ms. Townsend attended a symposium hosted by Hewlett-Packard (Canada) Co. (HP Canada) where she learned about a new, affordable Professional Development program that enables teachers to develop the ideas, capabilities and skills they need to enrich the learning experience and integrate IT into the curriculum.

“I immediately had an ‘aha’ moment. When I listened to the structure of the program, I thought it would work,” she says.

The “program” to which Townsend is referring is sold by HP Canada and is unique in that, according to Joan Rocha, Education Solutions Consultant at HP, “The HP Professional Development Program is a framework which allows teachers to become more comfortable and effective in the use and application of technology in the classroom. It is not tied to HP technology or curriculum.”

Curriculum is the domain of school boards and districts. In this case, there is adherence to a set of technology standards developed by ISTE (International Society for Technology in Education). While the HP PD program has an inherent structure and sequence, it can be customized to incorporate the specific goals or targets that a school board or district is working towards. Participants are guided to align their work with their larger organizational goals.

So, what is different about this? The HP professional development program is mentor-based and executed in an ongoing, online, collaborative working environment. Each group of five educators connects online with up to five other groups of educators to form a team. Each team is paired with an educator-mentor. The mentor is an experienced educator who has a proven track record of improving instruction and student learning through effective technology integration. These mentors work with the team over the course of the program (up to 10 months), providing suggestions, guidance and feedback on team and individual



Online Connections: A New Approach to PD

By Wili Liberman

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work, giving the educators a chance to try new skills in the classroom while receiving coaching and guidance as they do so.

The job-embedded learning takes place via a variety of online tools including an online portfolio, threaded discussions, chats, blogs, podcasts, email, video conferencing, webinars, and message boards. And School-based groups have the option to meet physically while working through the project they have elected to pursue. The focus of the selected project is to improve student achievement through the use of technology. As a given project unfolds over the course of the academic year, the groups monitor each other’s development, report on progress and findings and measure student and teacher achievement against the highly respected set of Technology Standards (known as NETS) developed by ISTE (Please see Web links below).

The HP Professional Development program evolved from a separate HP Philanthropic program called the HP Technology for Teaching Grant Initiative that began in 2004. In 2008, 10 K-12 schools and five higher-education institutions across Canada were awarded a total of more than \$775,000 in technology, cash and professional development

to develop new lessons and projects that enhance education through greater access to technology.

In 2005, Bev Wilkinson, a science teacher at Brookfield High School in Ottawa, along with four other teachers in her school were invited to submit a Technology for Teaching grant application to HP. Their successful proposal focused on the technology they would need to study the environmental health of the school and to explore the area’s biodiversity that included the Rideau River.

“The grant gave us Professional Development and technology that we integrated into the classrooms,” Wilkinson says. For example, using the projectors, she could show the Internet on screen in class and use it as an electronic chalkboard, which she said was great for teaching Physics.

“Using a PC was more dynamic, more visual, easier to see and you can also do graphs, animations and experiments like running a pendulum and seeing what happens when you take away gravity,” she says. Another benefit involved taking the tablet PCs on field trips and entering data, capturing information accurately while involving students in a real-time data analysis activity.



Either HP program (HP Professional Development or the HP Technology for Teaching Grant Initiative) provides support to education professionals to help them incorporate technology into teaching programs, processes and environments enabling improved student engagement.

The benefits of the professional development program, says Hilary Lamonte who leads ISTE's professional development efforts is, "teachers get to leapfrog trial and error, making technology a useful and beneficial part of class work. The theme we hear from teachers is they have really changed teaching and will never go back. And that the ongoing, anywhere, anytime support was the key to that change."

According to Ms. Townsend, the Simcoe County District School Board is primed and ready to roll out the Professional Development framework.

"We are looking at involving 15 teachers working in groups of five who will be part of other networks beyond our own board, in other boards, provinces and in the States and this will deliver benefits. We have realized the power of putting teachers together into professional learning communities. We are better now at tracking student achievement, knowing what they need to have to move forward on learning. We can focus on student needs."

The Simcoe Board is also planning to have the teachers released several times a year so they can meet and share information. Later on, there will be an open session where any teachers interested in professional development will be invited to attend. The teacher teams will demonstrate what they have done and that will further generate interest in this approach to professional development.

"This is a new shift," Ms. Townsend says. "We have been content-driven in the past, we had a curriculum to deliver. We need to focus on data we get from students and focus teachers in that direction. We will get far more satisfied students and teachers. Students want to learn in different ways and we have to make that shift. We will shift those classrooms to the 21st century and Web 2.0 technology. IT will make it more exciting and powerful to people involved."

Each team-generated project will run throughout the school year and as it evolves, teachers will evaluate their performance based on the ISTE standards as well as those of their students using the ISTE criteria. Each team submits a plan and the mentor works with them on implementation. For example, if the project focus is non-fiction writing for grades six to eight, curriculum goals are examined as well as school board objectives. Teachers discuss and figure out how to integrate the use of technology to meet those goals and objectives. If they get stuck, the mentor will push them and offer up ideas,

such as writing an online journal that could relate to mathematics or an aspect of science. When a problem arises, there needs to be a consensus within the team or teams as to the solution, again with gentle prodding by the mentor. There are always other resources upon which to draw online...the community of teachers who are also learning as they go.

For Bev Wilkinson, the use of technology within her school has evolved to such an extent that the George Lucas Education Foundation came to film a seven-minute video on how they were integrating technology in their classes. And the integration of technology has mushroomed to include video conferencing with schools in other countries, trade fairs, environmental projects, interactive displays in the school foyer and more. "Being given technology on its own is not effective," she says. "It was the professional development that made the difference."

To find out about the HP Professional Development program, please go to www.hp.ca/education or call 1-800-563-5089.

Wili Liberman is editor and publisher of TEACH Magazine (www.teachmag.com) and you may contact him at wliberman@teachmag.com



LINKS

Brookfield High School on YouTube as filmed by the George Lucas Educational Foundation (Edutopia)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPsToU9uG_o

Technology Standards from ISTE
Overview

<http://www.iste.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=NETS>

Technology standards for Students (released 2007)
http://www.iste.org/Content/NavigationMenu/NETS/ForStudents/NETS_for_Students.htm

Technology standards for Teachers (released 2008)
http://www.iste.org/Content/NavigationMenu/NETS/ForTeachers/NETS_for_Teachers.htm

Technology standards for Administrators (new version to be released in 2009)
http://www.iste.org/Content/NavigationMenu/NETS/ForAdministrators/NETS_for_Administrators.htm