

Technology without tears

Coach guides a technology integration effort that is more about the professional learning than the computers

By Tracy Crow

Fear among teachers was the first obstacle that Diane Bennett encountered in her role as a technology coach. They were fearful because technology is a different beast than the content that high school teachers normally embrace.

“I had a good friend who was so fearful [about learning technology skills] that she would cry. Teachers didn’t want to admit that they didn’t know how to use these tools. They knew that their students already knew how to use them,” said Bennett, a technology coach at Mt. Juliet High School in Mt. Juliet, Tenn. “High school teachers generally know their content so well and they have a fear of not being proficient in front of their students.”

So Bennett started with basics but found even that was a battle. “You can’t limit the students to just what the teachers know,” Bennett said.

She had to help teachers realize that this journey wasn’t about them. “That’s a danger in staff development, that you’re trying to meet the needs of teachers and you’re being blind to the needs of students,” Bennett said.

Bennett crafted a schoolwide coaching plan six years ago after her principal told her about a grant opportunity, the Technology Literacy Challenge Fund program. The program required that 100% of the school faculty integrate technology into their teaching. That couldn’t happen without a school-based coach to guide them. At the time, Bennett was a business education



teacher with 24 years of experience at Mt. Juliet High School. She employed technology tools back in the days of the IBM Selectric and was already leading after school technology workshops for teachers who were craving the tools.

The program specified that the school had to spend 50% of their funds on professional development. “This program was not about the ‘stuff,’ it was about the professional development,” said Bennett. In terms of the professional development, only 5% of funds could be spent on external consultants; the professional learning became strongly school-based by design.

Photo by DIANNE JENKINS
Diane Bennett, standing, works with English teacher Lori Scott, left, and social studies teacher Samantha Davenport.

Now Bennett realizes that high schools tend to be “harder to change” than elementary schools, she said. “High school teachers are so in love with their content — they love their math, their English. For a coach, this is an advantage and a disadvantage,” Bennett said. She realized she could engage teachers with the content but then it became difficult to get teachers to practice real integration into the curriculum.

Bennett designed her work so that she would spend time with all 76 faculty members during her first year of coaching. She divided the staff into seven teams of 10 to 12 teachers. She brought teachers in “two by two, like the ark — two English teachers, two history teachers, two math teachers,” she said, in order to give them the comfort of working with a teacher of their content area and the opportunity to work with teachers from other departments.

Each team spent an intense month of learning and lesson building. During the first week of the month, two days were set aside for very basic technology skills. For example, she helped teachers learn five things each about Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel.

Then, teachers returned to their classrooms for a week, during which they reflected on what they had learned and started to think about student needs and how they might incorporate what they already knew into their teaching.

During this time, Bennett noticed that teachers would gather in the halls to talk about what they were learning. She hadn’t realized that this would happen so quickly when she structured the learning groups.

When teachers returned for two more days of work with Bennett, they learned how to build web-based classroom lessons. Many teachers partnered with someone outside of their content area. For example, the Family and Consumer Sciences teacher worked with the Latin teacher after they realized what they had in common — the FCS teacher did a unit on sauces and the Latin teacher did a unit on food and how early Romans preserved food through their sauces. Through this collaboration, teachers started to realize the power of talking across the table with other content area specialists.

In week three, the teachers taught their les-

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Position: Technology coach

School: Mt. Juliet High School

School district: Wilson County (Tenn.) Schools

Professional history: Twenty four years as a business education teacher in Wilson County, Tenn. at Mt. Juliet High, six years at Mt. Juliet High as technology coach which includes being a regional professional development coordinator for EdTech ORBIT Grant (Orchestrating Regional Bases Integrating Technology) for Upper Cumberland Region of Tennessee (2005-06). Mentor to various schools and school districts in writing and implementing educational technology grants in Tennessee from 2001-06.

Education: Bachelor’s in business education from Middle Tennessee State University in 1974; master’s of business education with vocational education emphasis, Middle Tennessee State University, 1981.

Awards and honors: Twice named Wilson County Teacher of the Year and Mt. Juliet High School Teacher of the Year (1986 and 2002); nominated for Disney Educator of the Year, (2002), Apple for the Teacher Award (2002), Middle Tennessee Teachers Hall of Fame (1998); Vocational Teacher of the Year (1987). Received Community Celebration Award from Superintendent of Schools for Volunteer Spirit and Serious Endeavor for Personal/Professional Achievement as an educator (1986).

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sons. Bennett observed each lesson. The school had purchased laptops for teachers and also three wireless laptop labs for student use during class.

In the last week of the month, the teacher teams met after school for reflection and discussion. Teachers shared how their lessons worked, examined student work together, and talked about the challenges.

Bennett went through this cycle each month with a different team. Very quickly, she found that the design had a domino effect in the school

High schools tend to be harder to change than elementary schools, Diane Bennett believes. “High school teachers are so in love with their content — they love their math, their English. For a coach, this is an advantage and a disadvantage.”

— she saw changes throughout the school after just the first couple of cycles.

The learning opportunities continued throughout the year for all teachers through a series of 15 three-hour sessions for more professional development. Bennett said, “these were not one-shot workshops — they built on the work that the teachers had already done.” Teachers had the opportunity to attend five or more of these after-school sessions.

By the end of the year, the technology integration program had 100% participation from faculty. Bennett said, “not that it was always a happy campground.” Teachers have to release some of the control but keep a certain level of security. “With technology, there are more mountains to climb,” Bennett noted.

That first year of funding and coaching set the stage for Mt. Juliet High School to continue developing technology integration programs. If the high school raised student test scores in two out of three key content areas, then they would be granted additional money from the state of Tennessee to continue the program for a second year. Because the school raised scores in 11th grade writing and student scores on the ACT, they received the continuation funds, which they used entirely for professional development. The district picked up Bennett’s salary as a coach at that time.

Bennett said her principal has been wonderful throughout her years as a coach. “He’s not tech-savvy, but he knows that administrative support is critical to this work. I have awesome support,” she said.

Since 2001, Bennett and Mt. Juliet High School have been involved in more technology programs — serving as an anchor school in a regional technology implementation program, working as mentors to different schools, and

Related web sites

www.wcschools.com/mjhs/tlcf

As a requirement of the school’s first technology grant from the Tennessee Model Schools program, Bennett kept a weekly web-based journal. This site has more details on the school’s challenges and Bennett’s reflections on their progress. Digital photos and professional development challenges are included.

www.edtechcoach.com

Site documents other funded technology projects that Bennett oversees at Mt. Juliet High School.

www.taskstream.com/pub/reflect/

Includes information about the electronic portfolio project.

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— Diane Bennett

building electronic portfolios for students as part of a national research project underwritten by TaskStream. Bennett continues to write grants and bring in funds to facilitate what the school undertakes.

Mostly, Bennett keeps on coaching. She still spends a lot of time on building technology skills. “But it’s not really about the technology — that’s so embedded in what we do. The work is about the curriculum and the teaching,” she said. Mt. Juliet’s teachers are significantly more tech-savvy now than they were six years ago — they do online book studies and build lessons that incorporate podcasts. Bennett’s job is to keep teachers as knowledgeable about technology as possible. “There will always be new technologies for teachers to learn,” she said. ♦

Two NSDC tools on technology in the classroom

- Technology integration, reflection, and collection, p. 13
- Checking the indicators of engaged learning, p. 14