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Modern Tools for a Modern Education

Effective strategies help K-12 schools adopt
personalized learning experiences.

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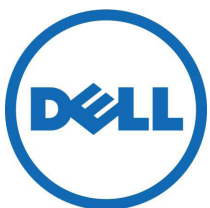


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Students need a broad set of skills to be successful in today’s world. To better help them prepare, K-12 districts throughout the country are taking a blended approach to achieve personalized learning. Making that transition successfully starts with envisioning what learning should look like and how to create authentic learning experiences.

Two school districts currently making that transition are the Cabarrus County Schools in North Carolina and Lake Travis Independent School District in Texas. These districts are building a sustainable and scalable learning model, providing professional learning experiences for teachers, and achieving a positive impact on student outcomes with the help of their technology partnership with Dell.

Build a Sustainable and Scalable Learning Model

This transformation process all starts with developing a vision—a way for school districts to think about what learning should look like and how to provide students with the skills they need for the future through student-centered learning.

“There are a lot of school districts that feel if they simply put technology into the hands of the kids, then they’ll be successful. But that’s a failed model for sure,” says Adam Garry, Dell’s Manager of Global Education Strategy. “If you’re not starting with a vision, you’re going to have a very small impact on learning in general. You need to start with a clear vision for teaching and learning.”

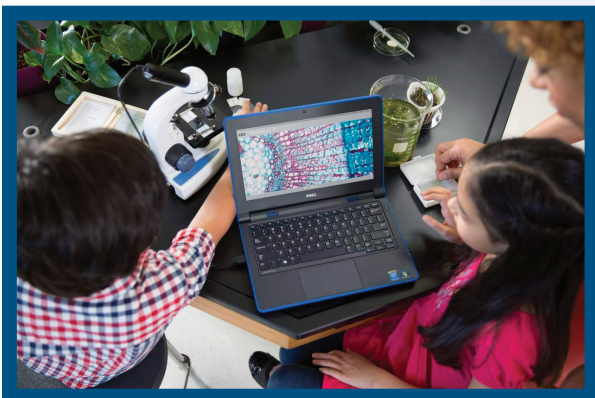
One way Dell helps schools and districts with that visioning process is by facilitating a Visioning Day. This is a day in which all education stakeholders—students, teachers, parents, district leaders and the business community—get together to talk about what learning should look like and how the district can create authentic learning experiences for all students.

By the end of the day, says Garry, educators have a defined set of skills they need to focus on in order for students to be successful in college or a career. Then Dell specialists help the district define their learning model in the context of blended learning. “We have always defined blended learning as removing time as a barrier to learning,” says Garry. “It’s about rethinking where and how learning can happen and then about how the technology can support a blended learning environment.”

When some schools think about blended learning, they think about a flipped classroom model and conclude they have blended learning because that learning can happen at home. “A flipped model is not a model for blended learning,” cautions Garry. “It’s a strategy.”

A true blended learning model starts with determining how students learn best. “If your digital assets and resources aren’t put together in such a way that supports the types of learning you want to see,” he says, “then you’ll still only get pockets of excellence because teachers are simply not going to be able to utilize those resources in an appropriate way.”

He expanded on that explanation, adding, “If you put technology in the hands of teachers and you’ve not given those teachers a vision or the resources and tools to do some things differently, all they know how to do is what they did before – only with technology on top of it.”



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—Jason Van Heukelum, Deputy Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction for Cabarrus County Schools

In other words, to be successful you don’t start with technology. You start with the learning model. “Technology is not the point,” says Jason Van Heukelum, Deputy Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction for Cabarrus County Schools in North Carolina. “We really don’t care about technology.”

At Cabarrus the focus is instead on student learning and student outcomes and preparing students to be productive and competitive citizens for the 21st century. “To the extent that technology can be a part of that goal is the extent to which we are going to embrace technology in the service of learning and making teaching more effective,” he says.

Textbooks and other media-based content were not nearly as engaging to students nor enabling to teachers, who wanted flexibility in designing their instructional plans. To better help drive student-centered learning, Van Heukelum tapped into rich sources of digital content on the web.

What led Van Heukelum and his team to embrace technology was the chance to personalize the curriculum for students more than they ever thought possible. “Of course, teachers have been trying for 100 years to tailor their teaching to meet the different needs of individual students,” he says.

The Cabarrus County Schools system, headquartered in Concord, NC, is one of the largest in the state. It presides over 39 schools and serves more than 30,000 students. The district is self-described as “progressive, innovative and child-centered.” Its goal is clear: To produce globally-competitive, lifelong learners through rigorous and relevant curriculum taught by highly prepared visionary leaders who recognize the importance of engaging a diverse body of learners.

Having made his point about the risks of implementing technology simply for technology’s sake, Van Heukelum also realizes that technology is an essential tool to support the shift to student-centered learning “There are several reasons why we embrace technology at Cabarrus County,” he says. “The first reason is the opportunity to truly differentiate learning for our students, based on what they know and what they don’t know, and on their needs and interest.”

Students come to school with a variety of backgrounds and a variety of knowledge, he notes. “When we teach one concept to all kids, inevitably we bore some kids, we challenge other kids, and we over-challenge still others.”

That’s where technology can play a vital role. “It can help us differentiate instruction based on the innate curiosity of kids in a way we’ve never been able to do before ... at least not easily,” Van Heukelum says. “A teacher can give me one piece of content and you a different piece of content, based on what we enjoy, what we like, or what we’re curious about. We’re both going to learn the same standard, but in a different way.”

That aspect of learning is what excites Van Heukelum, and inspires him to continue applying technology where he feels it can truly make a difference. “The advent of really robust computer-adaptive tools, based on the artificial intelligence research, facilitate blended learning,” he says. “They make it possible to micro-assess students—what they know or don’t know—at all times, and as a result make learning experiences for kids more relevant and meaningful.”

Help Every Kid Reach Their Full Potential

A relevant and meaningful learning experience is an important objective at Lake Travis Independent School District, located 20 minutes outside of Austin, TX. During the past year, the Lake Travis District, which consists of six elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school serving about 9,000 students, has made a concerted effort to move toward personalized learning.

“It’s so easy to focus just on the technology,” says Carl McLendon, Educational Technology Coordinator at Lake Travis. “A lot of schools have made that mistake. They say, ‘Oh, technology is the future. Let’s go buy some devices.’ And then they try to figure it out. We’re going the opposite way. We start with what we want students to be able to do when they leave here. And then we think about how technology helps us get there.”

According to McLendon, the visioning day led by Dell at Lake Travis helped the district envision 21st century teaching and learning. “It wasn’t just about the technology. It was a visioning process of what we want education for our students at Lake Travis to look like, and how we can get there through personalized learning.”



Courtesy of Dell

Part of the visioning process was clearly defining what personalized learning means and how to put it into practice. “A lot of schools think of personalized learning as a kid just sitting at a computer, playing a game or walking through an electronic worksheet,” says McLendon. “But at Lake Travis, personalized learning means helping every student learn to his or her potentials.”

To do that, the Lake Travis teachers are using a learning platform to help them to better engage students and help them take some ownership of their learning. “The idea of student choice and pace of learning is really emerging as keys to meeting the needs of a diverse group of students,” he says.

Changing the Professional Culture

The students aren’t the only ones learning throughout this process. The teachers are learning new ways to approach their profession. “Whatever we want the learning model to look like,” says Dell’s Garry, “then the professional learning model must look similar.”

At Cabarrus County Schools, that means minimizing technology-only training and focusing on good pedagogy. “Early on, you have to do some stand-alone training around the technology tools,” says Van Heukelum, “but after that initial orientation to the digital tools that teachers will be using, all of our professional development is centered around good teaching, good pedagogy, and content discipline—tried-and-true research-based strategies that we’ve been using prior to the influx of technology.”

At the same time, Van Heukelum says, it’s important to make it clear to teachers from the start that they matter and they are truly the ones who will make this work. “We

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are not replacing teachers with computers,” he says emphatically. “We don’t want to replace teachers with computers.”

According to Van Heukelum, reassuring teachers that way helps them embrace technology without feeling frightened or obsolete or feeling that their role is being diminished. It’s also important to make the training relevant. For example, he may show teachers how the tools help them improve small group instruction—to do it even better so more kids learn at a greater rate. “By doing that,” he says, “teachers have a better understanding of how the digital tools can help them accomplish their ultimate objective, which is learning.”

“Go Slow to Go Fast”

The Lake Travis school district has a unique philosophy when it comes to professional learning: Go slow to go fast. “Technology training is important. It’s the first step that leads teachers into the possibilities,” says McLendon. “But we don’t want to overwhelm the teachers. So we really focus on on-going professional learning in which teachers are continuously engaging with the curriculum instruction department to help them integrate the digital resources.”

Perhaps more importantly, professional learning at Lake Travis focuses on peer-to-peer relationships. “Teachers learn best from other teachers that they work alongside every day,” says McLendon. “They share discoveries and ideas in their classroom together.”

Of course like their students, every teacher learns at their own pace, and is at a different place on the spectrum. “We respect and support that, but we know we’ve got to get better and that takes continual professional learning. We hold our teachers to that from our youngest to the most veteran teachers. We need them all,” says McLendon.

What about the future for personalized learning in the district? McLendon reflects on when President Kennedy announced the country’s ambition to explore the moon. “He didn’t say we’re going to the moon and here’s how we’ll get there,” he says. “He said, ‘We’re going to the moon and we’re really not sure how we’re going to get there, but we’ll figure it out and we’ll get there.’ That’s the narrative I keep saying over and over to teachers and parents.”

The bottom line at both Cabarrus and Lake Travis, as with any progressive school district, is it simply takes work to transform teaching and learning. According to Garry, it won’t be successful with a top-down approach. “While it’s important for leaders to initiate change and model desired behavior, to successfully shift culture, buy-in has to occur at the school and classroom level.”

A key goal in any plan is to establish a sustainable student-centered learned program by accelerating instructional leadership “capacity” among classroom teachers and site administrators. Through this capacity, districts have the means to build a sustainable and scalable model on both the school- and district-wide level, to accelerate the

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learning of a core group of people who support colleagues in small groups. This helps facilitate on-going and progressively expanding success.

That feeling is certainly shared. “Every chance I get,” Van Heukelum adds, “I tell teachers, ‘It’s not an instant fix. If you’re not willing to do the hard work of really transforming the learning model, so that it’s based on ideas that work, such as small group instruction or collaborative groups or whatever, then adding technology to your school is not going to change your education.’ It’s not going to get you better outcomes.”

Develop a Successful Partnership

Both Van Heukelum and McLendon agree that for any school or district looking to shift to a student-centered learning environment, one of the most important steps is finding a technology vendor that understands their needs and can partner with the district for successful results.

The Lake Travis School District has a long-standing partnership with Dell. Over the last three years, though, that relationship has strengthened. Today, he says, Dell not only provides the district with a lot of its digital tools, but is also helping the district build its network infrastructure. It’s helping the district develop a measurement tool for quantitative data for measuring student outcomes; and is also helping the district with ongoing professional learning.

One big change at Lake Travis in the last year and a half, says McLendon, is the move to Dell Chromebooks. “It recently grew from nothing to a pretty large chunk of our inventory,” he says. “It has been interesting to watch our teachers and students take these devices and use them because they engage so well with our learning management systems and with our Google Apps. We are a Google Apps for Education school.”

Cabarrus County Schools has also been a long-time customer of Dell, and has recently vested in 9,000 Dell Chromebooks for the coming school year. “We don’t issue a computer to every kid,” says Van Heukelum. “We don’t have a 1:1 initiative. But we have tried to saturate our school with technology, so the device is there when students need them.”

Van Heukelum says his school’s technology director explains it this way: “We want the technology to be the ecology of our school. It’s just there. It’s no longer novel; it’s no longer a toy; it’s no longer something cool. It’s part of the landscape.”

Conclusion

Helping students be successful in a global society is truly the goal. Dell is committed to helping K-12 school districts identify their vision for education, develop their learning models in the context of blended learning, and provide students with the personalized learning experiences.

“We have a lot of experience in the area of curriculum and instruction, not just technology,” says Dell’s Garry. “We’ve also spent the time to roll up our sleeves and work side by side with school districts to figure out what a platform would have to look

like to truly support personalized learning. These experiences have given us a unique ability to coach our partner districts through the process of selecting the right tools and functionality to support student-centered learning.”

Garry explains “Our approach to personalized learning is making sure that students have voice and choice in the learning process and that starts during the visioning stage.” Once the vision has been defined, it’s important to ask the right questions to understand what is needed to move forward. Do you have the wireless that you need? Do you have the learning platform? “By building an ecosystem of support, we can help educators transform teaching and learning throughout K-12 education,” he says. “It’s what differentiates us from other vendors.”

About Dell

Dell Inc. is committed to helping students develop the knowledge and skills they need to learn and succeed in an increasingly digital world and a globally competitive workforce. As a top provider of technology and services to schools, Dell listens to and works with students, educators, administrators, parents and community members around the world to deliver innovative technology and services that give them the power to do more in and out of the classroom. Learn more about Dell in Education at www.dell.com. Follow us on Twitter @DellEDU.

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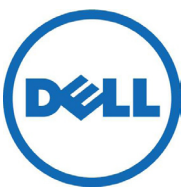
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