

School Leadership in the Digital Age



by

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I am the District Vice-Principal of Innovation & Technology with West Vancouver Schools, but I haven't always been an administrator. In fact, I have been a classroom teacher and a leader in educational technology for most of my thirty-plus years in education.

Not long after my teaching journey started, I discovered the school's computer lab, and my students and I began pushing the devices to see how far we could go beyond basic typing and word processing. I was one of the first teachers in the province to have a pod of laptops in my classroom, and I was amazed at how my teaching practice began to change.

From there, I earned a Masters in Educational Technology (MET), began delivering professional development to other teachers, kept learning, started a weekly ed-tech blog, taught myself how to code, became a Google Trainer, an Apple Distinguished Educator, and even taught Robotics! In 2023, I received the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence. It has been a crazy ride, but through it all my goals have not really changed. I

want to help educators and students use technology in safe, engaging, and meaningful ways, and to use technology to amplify and transform teacher and student voices.

Administrators are in a unique position to influence how, when, and why digital technology is used in schools. Yet, alongside our other leadership priorities, and the speed with which technology is changing, it is not surprising that many Principals and Vice-Principals feel overwhelmed when the topic of technology comes up.

Education is undergoing a seismic shift, brought about partially by cultural, societal, and political changes, and fueled by rapidly-evolving technologies. In such a dynamic environment, school leaders need to weave new technologies amongst the threads of tradition in order to create engaging, equitable, and future-proof learning experiences, while still keeping students safe, and educators onboard. No easy feat, combined with everything you must juggle! Where do you start? What follows are my **Top Tech Tips** for administrators.

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Tech Second

The best place to begin is the place where most of us are comfortable: 'education and learning first'. Don't get trapped by SNTS – *Shiny New Tech Syndrome*! In other words, don't be persuaded to adopt a new technology without understanding how it will enhance or augment the learning experience. At the same time, be open to the awareness that you might not see the immediate advantage of a tool or app. Check in with your tech experts if you are not sure. The second part of this involves ongoing assessment and weeding. If a technology tool is no longer serving its intended purpose, or has been eclipsed by newer, better technology, don't be afraid to make a change. Remember to provide loads of notice, of course, and a clear explanation to those who may be married to the technology. *I am speaking from experience on this one!*



From 10,000 Metres ... to Close Up!

Have a clear vision and expectations around the use of technology in your school or district. Think about ages, devices, needs, budgets, and equity. What that may look like in a small, rural elementary school with spotty Wi-Fi will be very different from what it looks like in a big metro high school where every student brings their device. The plan is best developed with input from various stakeholders, including students. The new Ministry of Education and Child Care guidelines on personal devices will give us all a chance to revisit our vision and expectations, and to clarify or modernize them. Once the decisions are made, make sure you communicate the plan clearly so that everyone understands the direction you are setting.



Modelling a Growth Mindset

Not a real techie? No problem! You might not truly understand the cybersecurity course your seniors are taking, or have the time to learn how your kindies created the “All About Penguins” video, but the teachers and students will remember that you took interest and asked questions. And, along the way, your own knowledge and expertise will grow. I was recently at a district-wide meeting where our superintendent used an AI tool to write a song about a retiring administrator. It was the perfect technique to model a new tool in a fun, non-stressful way. It sent the message that it is okay to try new things, and that play is a great way to learn!



Pro-D For Everyone

Connected to this, part of your job will be to ensure that the teachers on your staff have time to play with and explore new technologies. Ongoing professional learning will help teachers feel comfortable enough with technology that they will find ways to use it to engage students while tackling their pedagogical goals. Look to your techie teachers for a start on Pro-D. Honour their time and skill by giving them a stage. If they are not comfortable presenting, lots of educational technology apps have great webinars on their sites.

Accept that you will have people on your staff who are keen to try new technologies, and people who are not. Cultivate a school culture that allows for innovation and experimentation (as long as safety guidelines are followed), while ensuring that your less eager teachers still feel supported.

"Have a clear vision and expectations around the use of technology in your school or district. "



Don't Forget the Parents!

Many parents feel just as overwhelmed and helpless as some educators do when it comes to technology and their kids! Make sure you communicate your school's plans with them. Work with your PACs to run parent information nights or bootcamps. Engage some of your trustworthy secondary students to teach parents the basics of navigating social media or online gaming. Get a techie teacher to introduce parents to the apps and websites your students use to support teaching and learning.



Seek Allies, Mentors, and Questioners

Build a professional learning community. Read blogs, listen to podcasts, follow gurus on social media, read books. Do all of the above, or only one thing, but have a real or virtual place you can go, and people you can turn to, when questions arise! Don't forget to check in with people who have different opinions from yours – challenging your thinking is good practice. If none of that feels right for you, feel free to follow my blog or reach out to me!



Live Where The Kids Live

It is important to arm yourself and your staff with knowledge about the ed tech tools used at school but – as an administrator – you also need an understanding of the social media and gaming apps that your students are using. I have learned that when you approach students in a genuine way, they are usually quite willing to tell you about the latest SnapChat or Discord-type tool!

Too many students get in over their heads with these apps, suffering mental health issues, cyberbullying, and addiction. When things fall apart, people may very well turn to you for help and advice. Make sure you cultivate relationships with parents, the local police, youth workers, and tech-savvy teachers, all of whom can provide aid in tricky situations.



Make Sure They're Learning Digital Literacy and Citizenship

This one is non-negotiable. You must develop a plan to ensure that students are learning these vital skills, as many teachers are not yet teaching them. Students need to be taught how to safely, responsibly, and ethically live and thrive in an increasingly digital world. They need to learn about topics like online safety, critical thinking for evaluating

online information, and cyberbullying prevention. The goal is to empower them to navigate the digital world both confidently *and* ethically. If you are not sure where to start, Media Smarts and Common Sense both have great lesson plans. Teaching these skills can be done in a variety of ways. Make it a school focus for a week, such as during Digital Citizenship Week in October, and focus on certain grades – I find Grades 4 to 8 are the best ages to tackle many of these issues.

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What About You?

Along similar lines, it is important that you have a working knowledge of data security and privacy issues. What would you do if one of your students hacked into your laptop, or if a student's school accounts were compromised? Do you understand why certain websites are better than others in terms of protecting student data? These are all real issues that could have far-reaching consequences. Check with your district IT team, as they may have training sites you can access to learn more – or they might be able to give you the 'Coles Notes' version!

School leadership is complex, and technology issues may seem like just another responsibility among many. But having a fluency, comfort, and confidence with technology as a Principal or Vice-Principal will have a critical influence on a wide spectrum of your tasks, and will become increasingly important as a tool in your toolbox. I invite you to dig deeper, to connect with friends and colleagues who are just starting to learn about educational technology, and those who are well on their way. You will learn so much, you will make many connections, and – perhaps – you will wonder what was holding you back.



Media Smarts
Canada's Centre for Digital
Media Literacy



Common Sense
Media