Illinois Elementary School District Brings Importance Back to Labs With EasyTech

Zion Elementary School District 6 resists trend of dismantling tech labs, equips students with digital literacy skills.

Identifying a Need for Consistency

When Tony DeMonte assumed the role of instructional technology coordinator at Zion Elementary School District 6 (Zion) in 2008, instruction in the district's tech labs lacked organization and cohesion. The seven school district, comprised of a highly mobile and low-income student population, had undergone budget cuts that left only non-certified teaching aides to staff its tech labs.

Lab activities for Zion's 2,000 elementary school students soon varied greatly from building to building. DeMonte quickly identified the need to standardize instruction and ensure all students developed foundational technology skills.

Creating a Deliberate Plan for Tech Labs

DeMonte's first step was to create a personalized learning community (PLC), which consisted of the district's tech lab staff and technology integration specialist.

"We had to have a serious discussion about the purpose behind what we were doing in the labs," said DeMonte. "With our district's mobility rate as high as it is, we asked ourselves, 'Doesn't it make sense to standardize what we're teaching in the labs?'"

With the goal of creating consistent lab experiences in mind, the PLC sifted through the newly arrived Common Core State Standards (CCSS) to chart a deliberate tech lab curriculum.

Breaking From Tradition

"For a long time, the model revolved around the classroom teachers and lab staff working together closely on lab instruction," said DeMonte. "But in reality, it rarely happened. Classroom teachers needed time to prep, so we took an approach that enables them to focus on what they do best: content instruction."

That's where Learning.com's digital literacy curriculum, EasyTech, comes in. Because EasyTech lessons are ready-made, non-certified teaching aides can deliver them consistently and effectively. The web-based application also works seamlessly with Zion's Chomebox-populated tech labs.

By dedicating lab time to building students' foundational tech skills, Zion lets classroom teachers focus on teaching students how to apply those skills. This approach gives students higher-order thinking opportunites, which are critical.

"The fundamental backbone of our tech curriculum is EasyTech," said DeMonte. "I'm a firm believer that students need a solid foundation of technology skills before they are asked to apply those skills in the classroom and on Next-Generation Assessments. We serve a low-income, highly mobile population, so you can't assume all the kids know how to use technology fluently. Even if students know how to text with two thumbs on a phone, that doesn't mean they can type efficiently enough to write a paper in a single sitting."

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Mapping and Empowering
Looking at CCSS language, the PLC identified key skills and worked to group those skills within each grade level. If a fourth grade student is expected to type a one-page paper, that means students need to learn basic typing skills as early as kindergarten. DeMonte and the PLC dissected the CCSS standard by standard, looking for technology-related expectations, and mapped students' paths to achievement.

To set students on the right track, Zion sequenced EasyTech lessons in accordance with CCSS benchmarks. Lab staff introduced basic technology lessons to lower grades, enabling students to make swift gains and apply the skills more quickly and critically in the classroom.

Next, Zion translated EasyTech objective language into "I can" statements and posted them throughout the district's labs. "A big part of Common Core is ensuring students can articulate what they're learning," said DeMonte.

Sparking a Paradigm Shift
Every class at Zion goes to the computer lab twice a week and works on the web-based EasyTech lessons. "Educators have seen students becoming stronger and stronger in their technology skills, over the past couple years and they understand the important work being done in the lab," according to DeMonte.

"The teachers have appreciated the fact that we're taking this new approach," said DeMonte "They feel when they drop their students at the computer, lab the time is well spent. The more seasoned teachers are thrilled because students are gaining knowledge in topics they are not always comfortable teaching."

With online assessments now a major priority for administrators, teachers, parents and students, Zion is highlighting the importance of taking tech lab work seriously.

"Students now feel that a heightened sense of purpose when they step into the lab," said DeMonte. "That new climate, and mindset that lab work is important, will carry over and serve students well when they go into the lab for high-stakes testing."

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