



# All Systems

**W**ould Sam Adams “friend” Lord Hillsborough if they were both on Facebook?

That question is probably way too easy for the students in Lisa Parachini’s American history class at Dysart High School near Phoenix, Ariz. The students each picked a Founding Father, made Facebook pages for them, accepted (or most likely rejected, in the case of Adams and the King’s colonial secretary) various “friend” queries, wrote persuasive blogs in the voices of their patriots, and otherwise became not mere spectators, but players in the American Revolution.

The class, which was videotaped and used in an ongoing professional development course for teachers, is a favorite of Evan Allred, director of information technology for the Dysart Unified School District, located in the aptly named Surprise, Ariz.

“That’s an example of Exceeding Standards, Future Ready,” he says, pointing to Dysart Unified’s mission statement.

And the class also proves that sometimes a district’s slogan means exactly what it says. “The (state) tests are here

## Lawrence Hardy

now, and we need to address them,” Allred says. “But we also need to look forward.”

Dysart is one of a growing number of districts that are integrating advanced technology into all of their operations, from instruction and assessment to transportation, records management, and school board functions. The 23,000-student district, which has tripled in size since 2000, is doing this despite severe budget cuts that have made states like Arizona synonymous with fiscal calamity.

Recent studies, however, suggest few districts are truly embracing technology. Just 8 percent of high school teachers said technology was fully integrated in the classroom, according to a report issued by CDW Government LLC, an information technology company. And teachers, not students, were using most of the technology.

Another study, by the nonprofit Project Tomorrow, said that only about 40 percent of students in grades six through 12 believe schools are adequately using technology.

So how has Dysart done it, especially given the financial hardship the district faces? It’s done it with a cadre of mostly young, tech-savvy employees who have made up for the lack of funds with enthusiasm and vision. The dis-



# Are Go

Schools have been using a piecemeal approach to technology integration for years, but some districts are embracing technology systemwide

district also had two staff members named to NSBA's "20 to Watch" list that honors teachers and administrators who are leading the way in defining 21st century skills.

"It speaks volumes if you've got energy at that young level," says Ann Flynn, director of NSBA's educational technology programs.

## From deficit to asset

Tony Wagner, co-director of the Change Leadership Group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, believes today's schools have not changed significantly from those that these students' parents attended.

"The 'problem,' simply stated," Wagner writes in *The Global Achievement Gap*, "is that the future of our economy, the strength of our democracy, and perhaps even the health of the planet's ecosystems depend on educating future generations in ways very different from how many of us were schooled."

Linda Auman, Fayetteville (Ark.) Public Schools' chief academic officer, isn't boasting when she says most districts in her state wouldn't mind being just like hers: She's merely stating the obvious.

Located near the University of Arkansas, this district of

8,600 students attracts some of the best teaching graduates from the state's flagship university. Recently, at Fayetteville High School, 85 students earned AP Scholar Awards; they represent 12 percent of the AP Scholars in the state. And, in 2009, the high school received the ACT College Readiness Award for increasing the number of ACT test takers and improving overall scores.

So, with all of these advantages, what did the school board say last summer? Words to the effect of: "Who's up for a deficit audit?"

"It takes courage for a district to take a step like this"—that is, to basically go looking for bad news, says school board President Susan Heil. "We don't want to have rosy. We know rosy."

The steps Fayetteville has taken are one reason why the district was selected for an NSBA site visit earlier this year.

"I think for me the thing that impressed me most about Fayetteville was the school board leadership," NSBA's Flynn says. "It's very hard for a school district that has a strong reputation for being successful to look at its deficits."

## Adapting to new growth

In a vast area northwest of Phoenix lies the second-fastest

growing district in the country.

"It was a very rural area when I arrived," Allred says of the town of Surprise. "I joked for the first six months or so that the Internet could be down for two days and no one would notice."

But, true to its name, the town's population suddenly boomed. Allred says that boom helped set the stage for today's technology-savvy district by bringing in hundreds of new teachers and compelling the district to assume a new role in the rapidly growing community.

During the past four years, the district, which is 49 percent minority and has a free and reduced lunch population of 41 percent, has taken advantage of state network modernization funds that equalize technology acquisition. "Second," Allred says in a recent report, "we began building a culture that emphasized using technology to transform instruction and administrative operations. With that emphasis, we began moving technology out of labs and libraries and into classrooms."

This fall, the district will be expanding Arizona's offering of online high school classes. And yet, in a true example of beyond-the-norm thinking, it will expand that concept so that eventually all classes from grades seven through 12 will have an online component.

The district has also expanded professional development and made it more accessible through its E3 Academy, a 60-hour professional development program in which participants work in school-based teams, explore collaborative planning, and formulate lessons that involve problem-based learning. In instruction, the district has begun to use iPAL technology that helps teachers pinpoint an individual student's strengths and weaknesses and offers specific lesson plans to address problem areas.

"They've just basically been piloting it, but that will be amazing," said school board President Jennifer Tanner.

### Looking forward, not back

Perhaps one of the premier qualities of an excellent school district is to look forward and not back, and that's what Fayetteville has done. The impetus, says Auman, was the fact that high school dropout rates had been creeping up over the past few years. So a committee composed of teachers, administrators, and central office staff took a close look at the high school and came up with an interesting conclusion.

"They said, 'You know, it's more than high school. It's across the district,'" Auman said.

The issue Auman refers to is the small but disturbing number of students who aren't reading well by third grade, what Heil says is a kind of universally agreed-upon "line in the sand" for developing true reading comprehension.

So the committee formed another group, a Literacy Committee, which—again, looking at the big picture—said

that what Fayetteville really needed was an outside curriculum audit that would tell it things like how well the curriculum was aligned with the standards the district had set for itself, and whether the responsibilities of teachers, administrators, board members, etc., were clearly delineated. That audit was conducted last summer by Phi Delta Kappa International (PDK).

PDK made nine recommendations for the district that addressed issues such as curriculum alignment and management, the assessment process, and the development of a "goal-focused district staff development plan that incorporates emphasis on growth in curriculum implementation, effective instructional strategies, technology, and skilled data use for instructional and curricular decision making."

The self-examination may have been difficult, "but it was spot on," Auman says. "These are the things that we needed to do, and we're in the process of doing them."

The district has already started addressing many of these issues, and is integrating technology into the solutions. For example, elementary teachers are using handheld wireless devices for individual student assessments and interventions. "They enter the data on their assessment of the student on a PDA," without time-consuming note-taking and transcribing, Auman says. "The students like it because it doesn't feel like an intervention."

The technology has been especially useful in the district's "Leap Ahead" summer program for children in early elementary school who are not achieving at grade level. The two-year-old program has been a success in reducing the achievement gap and ensuring that at-risk students don't lose ground during the summer.

Fayetteville has also set up model 21st century classrooms in every school, which have fully integrated technology that can serve as a teaching tool for both students and staff.

Another innovation is the use of Google.Docs for staff development, administrative meetings, and teacher orientation. The software allows all participants to enter information and comments at a common site, and enables the district to assign more in-depth duties to participants. Now, for example, when there is a principal's meeting, no one person writes the agenda. It is, instead, a collaborative effort that receives everyone's input.

"This is basically culture building," Heil says of the district's ongoing work. The district is "being very specific about what our expectations are and how we're going to get there. Technology is always part of that conversation. It's infused with that." ■

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