

Teacher Leaders Are Key to Success of 1:1 Laptop Program

Academy of Holy Angels staff development program ensured that teachers not only were competent in using laptop technology but that they had the tools, training and resources to be better, more creative and more efficient teachers with laptops than they were without them

Mary Nosek

Sometimes the thing that makes a technology program most successful isn't the technology at all.

When the Academy of Holy Angels (AHA), a co-educational, college preparatory high school in the Minneapolis suburb of Richfield,


decided to launch a laptop computer program called Project Laptop in the fall of 2007, leaders knew from the beginning that they wanted a program where technology was much more than just a nice-to-have tool. They wanted to make sure that technology became an integral element of teaching and learning, an essential resource for

delivering content and enhancing achievement as well as ensuring that students learned technology skills they would need now and in the future. In other words, having technology is not enough; integrating technology into the curriculum is essential for success.

To get there required extensive planning in many areas: hardware installation, software acquisition, parent communication and much more. But one of the project's most important—and most successful—aspects was its staff development program designed to ensure that teachers not only were competent in using laptop technology but that they had the tools, training and

resources to be better, more creative and more efficient teachers with laptops than they were without them.

Project Laptop is in the third year of a four-year implementation plan. Today, every teacher and all students in



Teachers learned to be laptop leaders before introducing the 1:1 laptop program

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grades 9 through 11 are equipped with their own laptop computers, and teachers in every subject area are using laptops in the classroom. Here are some of the things AHA has learned about what it takes to ensure that faculty members are ready to embrace teaching with laptops and to do it well.

Start Before the Very Beginning

While the idea for a laptop computer program at AHA originated with the school's administration and board of trustees, those leaders understood that this idea would not succeed "top down." So they brought their idea to the school's technology committee, and one of the committee's initial tasks was to survey teachers to gauge their perspectives and hear their ideas, concerns and needs.

Talks led to a decision to implement Project Laptop in phases—and all the teachers participating in the Phase I first year of the program were volunteers. Only ninth graders were part of Phase I in 2007, and laptop instruction was focused in their core classes—social studies, theology, English and one level of world languages.

Phase I teachers got their laptop computers in December 2006, a full nine months prior to the "birth" of Project Laptop in September 2007. They spent those months getting to know their computers, learning about classroom uses for associated hardware like digital projectors and smart boards, attending formal classes and workshops and examining software applications and curriculum resources both formally and informally. Teachers who attended classes during the summer to prepare for Project Laptop received stipends for their time commitment.

Give 'em Leaders

Knowing that the success of its laptop program hinged on teachers who were equipped with the online curriculum tools they needed, AHA created a new position called "technology integration specialist." That person's role was to work as a guide and consultant to help teachers determine what tools, resources, and curriculum they required and what new skills they needed to learn. While the position was new, the person filling it was an AHA veteran—former English Department Chair Kathy Hanley. Hanley is an AHA alum who also has 28 years of experience as a teacher and a learning specialist, and she's



Class moves outside with individual laptops.

a core member of the school's technology committee. As a result, she brought essential skills to the task: She understood Project Laptop goals; she was deeply respected by the AHA faculty and she knew the school, its resources and limitations intimately.

In addition, Project Laptop developers knew that teachers needed world-class technology support to make sure that the tools they were introducing in the classroom did what they were supposed to do when they were supposed to do it. AHA technology support team members, led by Dustin Wesely—a former Geek Squad specialist—not only know hardware and software, they also know how to work with teachers, students and parents. Team members provide a lot of on-the-job training and they do it with a smile and good humor.

"As educators we often feel, because we've seen it sometimes, that changes in education are fads," said AHA Principal Heidi Foley. "I think that some educators think technology might fall into that category. It doesn't. Being able to use technology effectively will separate the 'haves' from the 'have nots' in our future. Including a one-to-one laptop computer program in a college-preparatory education is not just an enhancement for the 21st century, it is a must.

"Helping teachers to see, understand and deliver this important skill is the job of school leaders. Having an experienced veteran alum of the school stand before teachers as our technology integration specialist to share this learning has been a gift! Kathy Hanley was able to identify groups and individuals whose support we needed to make this effort successful. Teachers say, 'If Kathy thinks



Lab results are captured on the laptop.

it's a good idea, then I'll do it.' Her role as teacher and coordinator lends support and credibility to this work."

Provide Training Opportunities That Fit into Real Teachers' Schedules

Project originators understood that training and staff development needed to be an ongoing part of Project Laptop, and they knew that success dictated that training be organized to fit into teachers' already hectic lives. They accomplished that in several ways:

- During the summers of 2007 and 2008, they offered summer training opportunities, both at school and at offsite facilities, and teachers were compensated for their time.
- In the 2008-09 school year, AHA created a year-long series of twice-weekly training sessions designed so that teachers could participate during the school day without giving up their preparation time. The school accomplished that by hiring a substitute teacher who took over teachers' supervision duties, allowing them to attend training.

Create Your Own Experts

Certainly AHA used professional trainers for part of its staff development program—bringing in experts and sending teachers to classes at St. Paul-based TIES, a technology and information education service.

But the most successful component in the staff development effort was homegrown. A number of the teachers who participated in the Phase I year as volunteers became experts in their own right. In addition to learning hardware and software applications, they had introduced new learning strategies in their own classrooms—and

they knew what worked and what didn't. During the program's second year, a core group of these volunteers became mentor teachers, leading the twice-weekly training sessions and helping their peers develop skills and create new classroom techniques of their own.

Work the System

For some time, Holy Angels has used the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model for collaboration. Teachers meet with subject or grade-level peers to examine best practices, create and revise curriculum and develop common assessments and evaluation tools. Today, PLCs also are concentrating on the best ways to use laptops in learning and to create measurements that will help teachers know how well

they're doing, what's working best and how they as a team can ensure consistent, excellent instruction throughout their content areas.

Go the Extra Mile

Teachers, like other human beings, adopt technology at different rates and learn in different ways. During the summer of 2009, AHA offered one-to-one mentoring sessions, led by its own mentor teachers, for faculty members who wanted more practice using specific software applications, who were looking for new ways to adapt technology to their content areas or who wanted guidance in exploring specific curriculum resources to use in their classrooms. The one-on-one time offered more intense instruction between mentor and teacher.

Accountability is Good

Assessing progress is part of learning—even when it's the teachers' progress being assessed. Holy Angels has had a technology skills assessment program for teachers for a long time, but that program is changing. Two years ago, the technology competencies were expanded beyond tests to see whether teachers knew how to use Excel or if they could put together a PowerPoint presentation. The new competencies are built around standards for teachers from the International Society for Technology in Education. This year AHA is developing a new teacher-tech-

The Sisters of St. Joseph established Holy Angels in Minneapolis in 1877 and moved the school to its present campus in 1931. Holy Angels is accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, is a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon School of Excellence and winner of a 2008 Minnesota Quality Award.



nology skills assessment plan designed to help faculty members demonstrate how they use technology to enhance student learning and to show what technology skills they've acquired that are especially applicable to their content areas.

So What?

In the end, it all boils down to student achievement. State-of-the-art technology and exquisitely trained teachers are of limited value if a school can't point to gains in learning. When AHA launched Project Laptop in 2007, it also initiated a four-year study, facilitated by an independent organization, to determine the long-term impact of the program, particularly on student achievement. It's early yet, and some of the hard data is still inconclusive, but results indicate a positive impact on student motivation and organizational skills. Here are some things AHA learned in its spring 2009 survey of students, parents and staff:

- Students believe Project Laptop is helping them to become informed consumers and analyzers of information. Parents agreed with that assessment.
- The majority of students reported that having their own computers in school has improved their organizational and research skills, has taught them how to evaluate information on the Web and has helped them become more efficient at working collaboratively in teams.
- Student overall satisfaction with the program increased 12 percent from 2008 to 2009.
- Parents gave high marks to their children's basic computer skills and their abilities to do Web research, create presentations, work with spreadsheets and use word processing applications effectively.
- The majority of parents surveyed said that laptops are improving their student's ability to be informed consumers of information, effective thinkers and strong communicators.
- The portion of parents who felt that classroom laptops were helping their students learn increased 11 percent from 2008 to 2009.
- Eighty-nine percent of AHA teachers reported that they see laptops as a valuable teaching tool.
- Teachers report laptops are improving student abilities in problem solving, collaboration, organization and communication, and 74 percent said that computers motivate students to learn.

Laptop programs are not new, but many schools are still struggling with how to best use this tool to help them meet their ultimate goals. In Holy Angels' experience, one of the answers is to look beyond the technology and focus on the basic building block of an excellent education—a teacher who is engaged, dedicated and well trained. ☐