

Knowledge Quest

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Column: Real Questions, Good Answers

Title: Who should be running your district's technology department?

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Real Questions, Good Answers provides answers to those absolutely right-on questions we repeatedly get from outside our profession. The editor, Doug Johnson, Director of Media and Technology in the Mankato Public Schools invites readers to submit actual questions and write those articulate answers needed for Board members, principals, teachers and others who question the role of the school library and media specialists. Direct submissions to: Doug Johnson dougj@doug-johnson.com

I am the coordinator of media and information services for our district. I am responsible for library media centers and the "soft" side of information services - training, staff evaluation, instructional software review, etc..

My question is about organizational patterns. Our district has added a Technology Director who is in charge of all the hardware. He is forward-looking and understands that the proper use of technology is the key to his success. Like most other school districts, we don't have enough people to do all the jobs that need to be done, so we are looking at ways to better organize for service.

Where are the administrative computer services located in your district's organizational pattern? How do the instructional people (excuse the expression) interface with that whole side of the operation? To whom do they report?

I think the Technology director's goal will be to put library media centers along with information and other communication technologies into one organization headed by him. My gut reaction is that this will not be good for the students or teachers. I think their needs will not get really heard. But maybe I'm being reactionary.

Bonnie

Bonnie's concerns about her district's organizational patterns are not uncommon. Already at the building level, the addition of technologies to schools has resulted in new and changed job responsibilities for many media specialists¹ and often the addition of new personnel to take care of technical duties². Technology means changes at the district level as well. And the choice in leadership for the implementation and use of technology in a district will determine whether it a real asset to students, staff, and parents or just an expensive boondoggle.

In her must-read book, *Failure to Connect*³, Jane Healy reports on her visits to a variety of schools where technology is being used. And you can guess what she finds - technology being used as everything from a babysitter to a genuine educational tool that fosters higher-level thinking and communication. In some schools, Healy reports, technology is being used to reinforce the "factory model of education" with "a teacher (or

software) firmly in charge, dispensing a well-defined body of knowledge, and preparing a workforce accustomed to lining-up, doing what they are told and not asking too many questions” to a “learner-centered” approach in which the teacher is a “coach” and students ask questions and “actively pursue learning because it is important or interesting to them.” Why, she asks, are there such differences in schools?

One thing she observes that helps answer that question is this: “...a critical factor I found in every successful program (was) one energetic and visionary educator who knows what teaching should look like and had the energy and dedication to make it happen. No matter what the neighborhood, wealthy or poor, people like this make the difference.”

My guess is that every building in your district has one or more of these educators. But how many districts have them in administrative positions that have responsibility for technology throughout the district?

There is both a hard and soft side of technology administration and school technology leaders often have different concerns, as Bonnie’s letter suggests. The “hard” side technologies asks questions like:

- How can I keep it running?
- How much will it cost to implement or replace?
- Can I guarantee the system and data it contains will be secure?
- Are the administrative functions of state reporting, payroll, grading, scheduling, and transportation being accurately carried out?

Those responsible for the “soft” side of technology equation often worry about:

- How do I train teachers to effectively use the equipment?
- How can I encourage the use of technology to stimulate creative lessons and activities?
- What kinds of things should students be doing with the technology?
- Is technology making a difference in the performance of our students?
- How do I know if technology is providing more learning opportunities for more students?

Notice that the concerns of each side are not in opposition; they are only different. It is also apparent that neither side can function effectively without the other. As Bonnie’s letter indicates, her technology director “understands that proper use of technology is the key to his success.” And we all know that unless the technology is installed, operating, sufficiently powerful, and reliable, we may as well save our energies trying to get reluctant teachers to implement it into the curriculum. Face it - these folks are what Stephen Covey would call “interdependent.”

My experience is that it is imperative for a technology department to have both "hard" and "soft" experts on staff. ([see figure one](#)). And the key to whether they work well together is that they are housed together and *they report to the same boss*. The best decisions we make in our district are joint decisions that take into account curriculum and staff development, as well as hardware and networking realities. Both sides *really* need to listen to each other. My entire department, including the Instructional Computer Coordinator, Technical Support Coordinator, and Administrative Support Coordinator, and all building technicians, meets once a week to discuss day-to-day issues and often brainstorm future possibilities. When the library media specialists (who have the major technology integration responsibilities in their buildings) meet, the coordinators and technicians join us. Also both hard side and soft side representatives are on the district-level media-technology advisory committee.⁴

So what qualifications does this “techno-boss” need in order to be effective? Healy’s attributes (one energetic and visionary educator who knows what teaching should look like and had the energy and dedication to make it happen) are a good place to begin:

- Above all else, this techno-boss needs to be an experienced, successful educator. She understands that all

technology efforts are directed to meet educational goals. This is a person who has been a teacher and possibly an administrator and can empathize with both. She can articulate a clear *educational* philosophy and the place of technology within it.

- The techno-boss should be neither a technophobe nor technophile. A balanced approach to educational technology requires that this person is both a model user and advocate for technology, but understands that technology has its limitations.
- The techno-boss should have a whole-district view of technology. He understands what problems the district has and the goals it is trying to meet. He sees technology as part of the solution, not a separate entity undertaken for its own sake. This person can represent the district at community, state and national organization functions.
- The techno-boss needs to be an efficient manager. She may not need to know how to program a computer, extract data from the health services data base, or replace the toner cartridge in a laser printer, but she knows the person in the district who can and sees that it gets done when needed. And she let's them do it with a maximum amount of trust and freedom. (Johnson's First Law of Effective Supervision: Hire people that don't need to be supervised.)
- The techno-boss understands the ethical dimensions of technology use. He understands how technology has impacted the rules regarding copyright, materials selection, intellectual freedom and privacy.
- The techno-boss above all needs to be a leader – whatever that means. For me, it means creating and sharing a practical vision of a better system of schooling that serves more children in better ways. It means, as Tom Landry reminds us, getting folks to do things they do not want to do in order to accomplish the things they want to accomplish. It means getting people to see and address their problems in effective ways, and helping them grow in the process. It means getting people to talk and work together, to be empathetic and patient. It means risk, criticism, continuous self-evaluation, and the acceptance that life will always be one long, steep, learning curve.

No techno-boss that I know embodies all these characteristics, but the best folks I have the privilege of knowing and working with come very close – and many of them have come from a library background.

Bonnie, I hope that you and your district's new technology director establish good communications, find ways to be interdependent, and that you have a common supervisor who can help that happen.

1. Johnson, Doug. "Librarians are from Venus; Technicians are from Mars." *Technology Connection*, May 1998. <<http://www.doug-johnson.com/dougwri/venus.html>>
2. Johnson, Doug. "Why Do Libraries Need All Those Support People?" *Knowledge Quest*, Volume 27, Number 4. <<http://www.doug-johnson.com/dougwri/support.html>>
3. Healey, Jane M., *Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds for Better and Worse*. (Simon & Schuster, 1998)
4. Johnson, Doug. Advisory Advice. *Technology Connection*, October 1997. <http://www.doug-johnson.com/dougwri/advice.html>

This will be my 10th year to attend this conference and I always look forward to the excitement and new knowledge it brings. I am the Media Specialist in a new Pre-K/Grade 6 elementary school in Melbourne, FL. We opened in Aug. '98 with about 950 students and expect over 1100 next year. I have a wonderful library/media-tech center with state-of-the-art TV studio and 30 station lab with another 18 workstations soon to be up and running in the media center. My full time clerk is a degreed mechanical engineer who is very knowledgable and is like having another media specialist to work with me. We also have a guy Tech Specialist who is a former 1st grade teacher, so we 3 work closely as a team to manage all the information and technology resources. We think God must have a wonderful sense of humor to put together a team like us -- A very right-brained 50-something grandma-media specialist, a very left-brained 40-something soccer mom of teens/chief media (engineer) assistant, and a 30-something Thai guy, technie nerd guru. But we are learning to work together to make our school the best. We are blessed to have a young principal who promotes the ITI (Kovalik) Multiple Intelligence type practices and fosters an appreciation of all people as important pieces of the teaching/learning

puzzle -- which sounds like the type of thing you will be talking about. Having come from a very disagreeable, non-cooperative environment in my previous school, I truly believe I have come to Heaven-on-Earth at Longleaf.