Digital principals Dwight Carter, Carrie Jackson, and Ryan Imbriale know what it takes to maximize technology for learning and community involvement.

Ahead of the
DIGITAL LEAR

Dwight Carter admits he was a novice at social networking when he was introduced to the 140-character world of Twitter in 2010. Now, three years later, the principal of Ohio's Gahanna Lincoln High School doesn't know what he would do without it.

"When I was exposed to how Twitter can be used for educators, how you can communicate with educators from across the country and across the world, I started to learn more about it," said Carter, one of three winners of the 2013 NASSP Digital Principal Award. "It stuck. I was bitten. It just took off from there."

Today, Gahanna and Clark Hall—the school's tech-centric addition that opened in 2010—use social media and web tools as a primary means of communication among parents, students, teachers, and administrators. The band, the parent-teacher organization, and the lacrosse team have Twitter accounts; teachers receive inservice training on using and applying best technology practices in the classroom; and parents take free workshops so that they can keep up with the tools their children are using.

Winners Ryan Imbriale (the executive director of digital learning for Baltimore County [MD] Public Schools and a former principal of Patapsco High School and Center for the Arts in Baltimore) and Carrie Jackson (the principal of Timberview Middle School in Fort Worth, TX) have taken similar approaches to opening up their schools to students, parents, and the community. They have broadened the use of social networking and placed a defined, pragmatic emphasis on infusing technology throughout their schools, all in the interest of increasing student learning.

"It's about overcoming fear," said Jackson, whose neighborhood school opened in 2010. "That's the biggest thing. It was nonnegotiable when we opened this building. The staff we hired had to be fearless because it's tough to go out there and try something that wasn't being done."

Connection

Talk to anyone with a fleeting interest in education technology and you start to hear the same refrain: it's not about the device, but how it's being used. And if teachers and students can't trust the network they're accessing, they won't use it.

"It's not about the technology itself. It's what are we going to do with the technology to support student learning," said Brad Lewis, the executive director of the International Society of Technology Educators. "For principals, it's about dealing with fundamental change in a number of areas. It's about helping people feel comfortable with the biggest part of that change, which is the evolving nature of what it means to teach."

According to Sara Hall, the director of digital learning at the Alliance for Excellent Education in Washington, DC, it is "virtually impossible" for principals to help their

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Glenn Cook
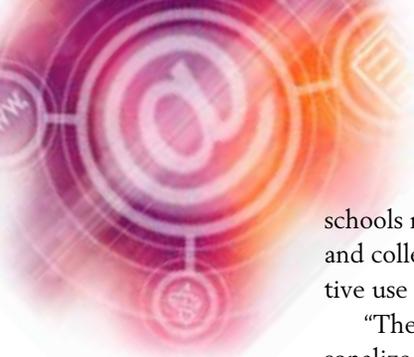
schools meet the Common Core State Standards and college readiness standards "without the effective use of technology."

"The fact that technology allows you to personalize instruction for far many more students is a huge opportunity," she said. "The challenge is really looking at it systemically. You need to make sure you have a specific curricular goal, such as career and college readiness, and take a step back and see what technology can do to help you achieve those goals."

That's what Imbriale had in mind when he became principal of Patapsco in 2009. Having started the district's high school online course program several years before and finding success in helping displaced students, he knew change started with infusing technology throughout the school.

"Infrastructure is absolutely essential, and there has been a lack of emphasis on that systemically around the country," Imbriale said. "You have to lay out your priorities and figure out where to invest, and it's always going to come back to asking, What are the areas that we are willing to focus on?"

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Imbriale put his money into a robust wireless network that allowed students and teachers to use their devices without problems. He called the move an "absolute essential first step." New technology was added to classrooms, and top-level professional development was provided for the staff.

"You can't have an instructional digital conversion if there's no digital or if people can't access it," he said. "Ensure that classrooms have the right tools for instruction right there in the room and that you have professional growth opportunities for those who want to be early adopters. Once teachers realize they're missing something special, they'll want to benefit from it."

Carter agreed. "We get caught up in the shiny devices but forget that if we can't connect to the wireless network, then what good are they?" he said. "Anyone can have a one-to-one program, but if the network doesn't support it, then what is that program doing to improve instruction?"

Communication

Today's students don't remember life without instant access to, well, almost everything. Constantly on their smart phones, those digital natives are using Twitter, Instagram, and a host of other apps we don't know about yet to communicate with their friends and the rest of the world. And they're quick to switch; Facebook, the largest social network in the world, is being dropped by teens in part because it has become too mainstream.

Historically, officials at K–12 schools have moved at a much slower pace, waiting to see what new innovation sticks before incorporating it into instruction, if they make the move at all. In addition to cost, many base their hesitation on fears—some well-founded—of cheating, cyberbullying, and sexting using mobile devices on school networks.

"Those things are happening because you're talking about behaviors, not about devices," Carter said. "It's a behavior that's occurring, and we have to focus on the behavior, not on shutting everything down. When you do that, you create a situation where school is not relevant or meaningful to students, which I think is a much bigger problem in the long run."

Education, all three awardwinners said, goes beyond the instruction that occurs in the classroom. In Jackson's case, educating the community about the goals of her new school became just as important as the instruction. Timberview, which serves grades 5–8, is a new technology-focused campus that represented two big changes for parents and community members. It combined the intermediate (grades 5–6) and middle schools (grades 7–8) onto one campus. Second, it is a neighborhood school, not a magnet—meaning that students were not specifically selected.

"At first, it was very, very difficult," Jackson said. "Many of our community members, especially those who came out of a university or higher education background, understood that what we were doing mimics what colleges and universities are doing. But the traditional population really opposed it and thought we were using their kids as guinea pigs. They kept asking, 'Why are you doing

this to us?'"

That's where the school's embrace—and persistent use—of social media came into play. The school started Twitter chats with parents and community members to answer questions and deliver information and held Twitter 101 classes on how to use the social media. By the end of 2012, the second school year, Jackson was looking into Pinterest and Instagram and continuing to boost the school's Facebook presence.

"If kids embrace the tool, we need to embrace the tool, too, so they can interact with us," Jackson said. "As we discover more of these tools that we think could be interesting, we're putting them to work and seeing what they will do. What people don't realize is how you can use social media and social tools for storytelling, to help build your relationships, and to tell the school's story. You'll find that it's not a burden, and you'll actually save time if you embrace them."

Carter, Imbriale, and Jackson admit that they've learned as much as they've taught during the move to digital learning. And they're seeing changes in their staff members and students.

"It's been an interesting transformation to watch," Jackson said. "When our kiddoes first came to us in 2010, they were looking for textbooks and paper worksheets. They just wanted the information handed to them, so they could give this input and achieve this desired result. Now, our kids are pushing the envelope and expecting teachers to give them something creative to do, something they can complete in a digital format. "

Preparation

For principals and districts considering the shift to a one-to-one program or digital textbooks, Jackson said the biggest challenge is to ensure that teachers "feel incredibly supported in this work." They must have real-time opportunities for professional learning that help them integrate technology into instruction. Giving them time to work with the tools, she said, is "absolutely key to success."

"What we see time and again are teachers who say, 'I had to completely shift the culture in my classroom. As opposed to being the person who knows everything in my room, I have to become the facilitator of learning. I had to let go of my inner control freak,'" Jackson said.

Nationally, districts that allow students to bring their own devices will be faced with "some serious equity questions" if they are not helping provide the same access to technology to all students, cautioned Ann Flynn, the director of educational technology for the National School Boards Association. "As we make an increasing shift to more digital content, as more and more of the assignments we give students become digital, then immediacy and access becomes more of an issue as far as creating a level playing field," she said.

Imbriale, who left Patapsco in July to become Baltimore County's executive director of digital learning, is now in charge of the district's five-year instructional digital conversion. The five-year program, once completed, will result in a one-to-one platform for all 107,000 students in the district. It is essential, Imbriale pointed out, to ensure that all students have quick and consistent access to the web, either through partnerships with the county library or low-cost programs with Internet service providers. Although it seems as if every student is carrying a smart phone or has an iPad under one arm, the fact is they don't.

"The technology is not what this project is about. This is about equity and about access," Imbriale said about the county's digital conversion. "A one-to-one program is really about giving students access to the tools on a constant basis. You have to be adept at using them to become a globally competitive citizen in today's world."

A Huge Shift

Carter believes that technology has forever changed the way that 21st century learning occurs. Teachers are now facilitators of learning, not experts who stand in the center of the classroom delivering monologues.

"There's a lot of information they used to possess that's now in the hands of the students because of the devices," he said. "The teaching we're moving toward now is about having the ability to ask questions and guide students through their learning. It's a huge shift, and to be part of it is very exciting." **PL**

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Author's note: All interviews were conducted in July and August 2013.