It is crucial that organizations have effective internal and external communication systems in order to successfully make changes or implement new programs. In schools, this need is more pronounced due to the high importance of social and personal relationships among learners and the adults in their world. The same is true for communications between home and school. In taking on a 1:1 program, dramatic changes occur when teaching and learning transition to digital platforms.

Project RED III co-authors recognize the significance of effective communications, particularly when implementing changes in organizations. This current study was immersed in Local Education Agencies (LEAs) that were making dramatic shifts toward a digital transformation. Research has demonstrated the importance of high-quality communications during organizational change and shows that organizational change and communication systems are intimately related processes. Organization studies demonstrate that communication has a positive correlation with numerous organizational yields like commitment, performance, cultural norms, collegial behaviors, and job satisfaction.1

Good communication systems foster productivity, group cohesion, collaboration, reflection, and an openness to risk taking. Lack of quality communication systems can lead to misunderstandings and altered project

"The newly released Project RED III research uses data from 20 Signature Districts, along with numerous other technology rich districts across the United States, which demonstrate using technology that is matched to appropriate pedagogy in the classroom, improves student learning and engagement, along with preparation for an economy in which students will work. The Project RED III research goes beyond "justification" for 1:1 implementation to instead demonstrating the "need" to use technology to transform learning for students."

~ Ann Linson
Superintendent of East Noble School Corporation
directions. When directions or plans are not clearly communicated or status and update reports are lacking or behind schedule, misunderstanding and frustration result. Having a project manager and an established project plan greatly facilitate communications and action plans.

At the very least, poor communications will cause conflicts in the workplace. These conflicts create uncertainty and fear. Educators need to know what is expected and that their leaders will work with them to flesh out realistic plans and expectations that advance shared goals without impeding individual workplace efficacy.

School personnel must help internal and external stakeholders understand the what, why, and how regarding a digital transformation. Certainly giving information is key, but also providing a feedback loop which includes a 360-degree approach for sharing and listening is imperative. Internal and external participants must be able to ask questions, provide feedback, and receive updates about the good, the bad, and adjustments that will be made along the journey.

When implementing 1:1 programs, school personnel need to build a system that responds to immediate concerns and has short- and long-term strategies regarding the unique components of 1:1 programs. School personnel must also have a district strategy and communications plan for ongoing, proactive systems of sharing and receiving information.

It proved beneficial that the Project RED co-authors had monthly meetings with three cohort groups (based on size of district) comprising the 17 Signature Districts. Participants included leaders of the respective district 1:1 programs and other team members. The Project RED website hosted forums where each key personnel role could post for his/her assigned group. Technology directors posted about the rapidity with which the education technology space is moving and how others are coping with and planning for these changes. Curriculum leaders asked and answered questions about integration of core curriculum with technology and instruction. Principals engaged one another in discourse around a variety of leadership and professional learning topics. These online conversations had their genesis through the powerful monthly discussions of each cohort group. Questions were raised, resources shared, and solutions discussed. There were robust exchanges that were helpful in finding solutions through this collaborative process. At the monthly meetings following these posts, more details were fleshed out which was very helpful to program enhancements.

The cohort gatherings also provided an opportunity to update program leaders new to their roles. New leaders learned valuable information such as the importance of having a redundancy plan in place to ensure continuity of a well-planned and implemented program. It was also especially helpful to new leaders to have online discussions with colleagues in order to learn about potential issues they may encounter and successful strategies.

Meaningful discoveries emerged from these ongoing exchanges. One of which was the commonality of experiences among the
districts. Where districts had particularly strong solutions and practices, they were posted and elaborated upon. That sharing was advantageous across the board. Infrastructure, bandwidth, professional learning, communications, technology and instruction, digital content, and platforms were hot topics. The latter reflect the Key Implementation Factors (KIFs) from the Project RED original research.

What the Data Say

The Project RED III survey results indicate that building administrators believed they had high levels of communication, feedback, and collaborative participation in their 1:1 programs. A caveat is that these data did not prove statistically significant in improving student achievement year to year or year over year. The fact that most of these survey results were not found to be statistically or educationally meaningful, as related to increased student achievement compared to state levels, requires further exploration. More study is needed to understand if this was indeed a disconnect or if the administrators belief in their high-quality communications needed more than three years to show enhanced student progress. Nevertheless, the data provides a portrait of the importance and framework of high-quality communications for a 1:1 program in a school and district.

In order to have planned effectively for their programs, Signature Districts needed a quality level of stakeholder engagement, and thus communications, in the planning and implementation process. The raw data indicate that 92.2% of the Signature District building administrators believe the district did a good job planning for their 1:1 program in Spring 2013, 89% in Spring 2014, and 92.4% in Spring 2015. These data from top-level leaders may be reflective of a lack of resistance experienced in relationship to their 1:1 programs.

Stakeholder engagement describes a broad, inclusive public participation process. Education has embraced this strategy which is crucial for successful transformations of any sort. When successfully executed, stakeholder engagement can enhance communications, garner greater support, marshal helpful data and ideas, enhance culture and climate, and facilitate more viable decision making. Looking forward to the future of competency-based and blended learning environments, more projects will require wider ranges of stakeholder groups. This is necessary to be sure individual and group concerns, and their unique needs and levels of influence, are part of the bigger process.

Decision making is a complex, rational process. Effective leaders know and understand these dynamics. Often a shared decision-making model is employed. Tarter and Hoy described decision making as, “rational, deliberative,
purposeful action, beginning with the development of a decision strategy and moving through implementation and appraisal of results.” (p. 212)

For this study, district administrators said that they used a shared decision-making model in their 1:1 planning and implementation (90.4% in Spring 2013, 80.9% in Spring 2014, and 92.7% in Spring 2015). These leaders also saw a high level of collaboration between their technology and instruction departments in 1:1 planning and implementation (86.8% in Spring 2013, 82.3% in Spring 2014, and 92.7% in Spring 2015).

Building and district administrators viewed internal communications positively. The latter group also saw themselves having done well in orienting the community stakeholders to the 1:1 program (87.7% in Spring 2013, 82.4% in Spring 2014, and 91.3% in Spring 2015). They also believed the district and community were supportive of the project (92.8% in Spring 2013, 89.8% in Spring 2014, and 98.5% in Spring 2015). These survey results are supported by the anecdotal observations that all the 1:1 programs in the 17 districts have marched forward over the three years (and beyond) with no indication of upheaval or negative reactions internally or externally. Without inside and outside stakeholder support, challenges would have bubbled up, at the very least, in the monthly cohort meetings.

Specific survey questions which focused on whether or not effective communications translated to increased student achievement were not designed or administered. However, we know through research in all industries the power and significance of quality communications and feedback in the workplace.

Renowned leadership expert, Mark Sanborn, indicates that “communication” is a vague word that is often misunderstood and believes that it is important for leaders to create understanding. The main tool to attain understanding is successful communication.\(^3\)

District and building-level leaders expressed that communications around implementing 1:1 programs were high quality. However, further investigation of systems and established protocol (if those existed) for communicating back and forth, horizontally and vertically with all stakeholders is needed. Did intentional, established communication systems exist? If so, what were the key components? Which, if any, of the necessary components were missing or overlooked? Were communications left to chance without specific methodologies identified and understood by stakeholder communities?

The Project RED Phase III study focused primarily on communications among adults and adult stakeholders. However, teacher and student communications are pivotal to the learning and achievement processes. The original Project RED research\(^4\) found that 84% of educators in 1:1 environments were much more likely to communicate with learners (via collaborative and online tools) than those in systems that were 2:1 or had higher computer-to-student ratios. Further, it was determined that:

More frequent communication with teachers helps students improve their performance.
Social norms may inhibit students from asking questions in class, but electronic questions can be asked and answered inside and outside of class, allowing for anonymity and privacy while securing the attention of the teacher. (p. 27)

**Implications**

Local Education Agencies (LEA’s)

LEAs must have a high-quality, multi-faceted, focused communication system when implementing digital conversions. There is a plethora of failed implementations dotting our landscape. Looking at the most infamous debacles, we found that solid communications across all the factors noted at the beginning of this brief were lacking. There were also other key implementation strategies absent. However, the conversation and sharing of information when undertaking any change or transformation is fundamental to the human experience.

A major contributor to positive communications is the project manager. The project manager is responsible for ensuring the established implementation plan has timetables, benchmarks, identified interdependencies, and budget and schedule updates. The project plan is part of the district’s and school’s written communication plan that describes objectives, strategies regarding how goals will be achieved, audiences, timelines, means of communicating, and project assessment. Communications consist of written, spoken, and digital engagement with stakeholder audiences, community members, and media outlets. Content for the plan should incorporate the mission and vision for the objectives; the purpose of each course of action such as research, landscape scan, or student outcomes; strategies for planning, development, and implementation; and stakeholder input and feedback. Task forces, committees, and steering groups are often utilized as leading and/or oversight groups accompanying the planning, implementation, and assessment. Liaisons from these groups should be designated for stakeholder audiences to ensure full circle sharing and opportunities for feedback. ²

As the program unfolds, consistent updates regarding progress, pitfalls, and successes are important. The ways the project is monitored and adjusted is crucial. Honest, forthright recognition of strengths and weaknesses go a long way.

Development and meetings of professional communities of practice are recommended. These avenues allow for peer collaboration and reflection on practice as well as student progress and outcomes. Leader involvement is important and helps guide the focus for these deliberations. We know that enduring professional communities of practice focused on learner progress contribute to overall student achievement. (See brief on Professional Learning.)

**Policy**

It is recommended that for any major transformation, such as moving to a 1:1 program, districts establish policies which require high-quality communications prior to commencement. The policy should outline
the key factors previously mentioned in this brief. An assessment needs to accompany the communications plan allowing stakeholders to weigh in on the effectiveness of the plans in place.6

It would be equally significant for district policy to dictate ongoing, job-embedded professional learning that includes establishment of communities of practice. These groups, evidenced in research, contribute to increased student achievement, when regularly implemented. Professional learning that is embedded in communities of practice ensure ongoing, focused communications among peers. With a focus on learner outcomes and how technology interfaces with those expectations, educators are able to not only share and reflect on their work but listen and benefit from the same among peers.

It may not be a universal practice in education, but it is recommended that district practice or policy include a project manager and project plan for all major undertakings and transformations. The absence of each leads to confusion, missteps in planning and execution, and failure to stay on time and on budget. It also results in a lack of ownership, responsibility, and accountability for key stakeholders.

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References & Notes


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