

# A Primer for Getting Community Support

By Isa Kaftal Zimmerman

In September, 1993, the regional school district serving the Massachusetts towns of Acton and Boxborough was languishing in its pursuit of technology to support learning and teaching. A widely-recognized "Lighthouse" community in the 1980's for supporting administration and management with technology, the system had lost its edge through lack of continuing financial support. The school system's director of technology had many ideas, plans, and energy but no resources and little political backing.

Enter a new superintendent who believed that technology is the single intervention which has the potential to change schooling significantly.

Based on my work in two previous school systems, I knew that targeting community support would be essential for any improvement in the condition of schools. I began by convening a Citizens Technology Advisory Committee (CTAC) of expert community members, school people and students, and co-chaired it with the director of technology.

## **Calling the Community**

We first focused on building a computer network. I described the needs and CTAC helped market them with a number of vehicles: a TV show called "Your Schools In Action," which included several episodes highlighting our want of educational technology; memos to the school committee, whose meetings are televised; articles and letters to the editor in local newspapers and a regular column in one; and student-written articles in their own newspaper.

I had started the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents Technology Task Force in 1991, which offered professional development for superintendents and members of their staffs; and I had convened and chaired a school-business consortium which wrote a position paper that found its way into the State Technology Plan. These prior activities had helped establish me as an authentic leader for technology in schools, a feature which helped my credibility in the local community.

That first spring, using Persuasion software, we presented a budget at a town meeting. We were able to include color pictures and graphs. In Acton, a high tech suburb, few expected that the schools could use high levels of technology. But many of the engineers and computer professionals who saw our presentation came away impressed.

## **Following a Master Plan**

During this period, the Town of Acton and its schools were competing for scarce resources. We offered to cooperate in the search for technology and help with the town's networking needs. And we also introduced a measure of restraint: although I wanted to ask the town for money for school technology then, CTAC advised me to wait, build up the support and go for funding during the second year.

In the fall of 1994, CTAC and the Acton-Boxborough School District planned a network that would cost as little as possible. The actual amount, because so much was done pro bono, would come to \$150,000. We decided first to secure the infrastructure from the two towns we served. We later could get gifts of computers from the local PTSOs and pursue funding for additional technology through grants and warrant articles.

In the meantime, so that it would be hard to vote down, we folded our computer networking proposal into the warrant article funding ADA and health and safety provisions. We argued that our schools needed infrastructure of several kinds--playgrounds (safety), ramps (ADA) and the network (technology). We successfully resisted the efforts of the Finance Committee and other citizens to pull the warrant article apart so that pieces could be voted up or down.

CTAC designed the network, described it to the School Committees and various town committees, and got approval to install it in all seven schools with First Class as our internal e-mail system. We also transformed a retiree's salary into three positions: curriculum integration technology specialist, a half-time technical support position, and a half-time secretary, thus starting the Technology Resource Center (TRC) and giving our Director of Technology the critical mass of support he needed to develop staff competence and use of the technology in the classroom.

## **Technology Takes Hold**

The private technology sector came forward as well. Tulsa Associates created a Help Desk for us. DEC gave one of the schools the latest Alpha server, which was then tailored by BBN and now serves the entire system; NYNEX donated a PictureTel setup to another elementary school in order to educate a child who was a shut-in.

The school system and TRC mounted a TECH EXPO on a Sunday afternoon in the spring of 1995, the day before Town Meeting, and invited teachers and students to demonstrate how they were using technology. Our business partners, NEC and DEC among them, spotlighted the cutting edge technology they were developing. We made the case that our students need new technology to face their future

successfully. TECH EXPO has since become an annual event which changes each year to reflect the new advances in technology and learning.

Students at Acton-Boxborough Regional High School created ABISS, Acton-Boxborough Internet Scout Service, which provided student tutors to help teachers at the high school learn how to use the Internet. The students presented at department meetings and then offered individual help. One of our students created our district [Web page](#) and schools and their students began to supply material for the site.

The principals quickly realized the value of technology as tools for both instruction and management and all began to use it regularly. Taking a cue from earlier successes, the elementary principals presented their budget to the School Committee using Persuasion software!

### **The Network Takes Off**

In September of 1995, we started using the network and email, through which parents and students with accounts at home began communicating compliments, complaints and questions. Teachers and staff responded by email and included our address in all the public information we provided.

In the following spring, the Town Meetings increased our funding better than six-fold, to almost \$950,000. There is a networked lab in each elementary school with an aide, paid for by either the school systems or the PTSOs. Students follow the course of the Iditerod Alaskan sled race in real time by themselves. They use Kids Network to study weather. They have contributed to a virtual museum of student art which has been constructed on our Web site.

The junior high has two computer labs. Students study mathematics and robotics. They follow tagged whales using EnviroNet and digital digging. There are three labs in the high school and a state-of-the-art world language lab and a Computer Assisted Design facility, through which students developed a virtual nature trail and placed it on the Web. They are using a program to support reading instruction. They have engaged in a CU-SeeMe conference with Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy.

We count among our business partners Bay Networks, 3Com, Sun Microsystems, some of whom joined us through NetDay collaboration, as well as DEC and NEC. We have received about a half million dollars worth of contributions from them. While we have not reached our goal of a networked computer for every member of our school system, nor achieved the goal of using the technology seamlessly and appropriately throughout the curriculum and the school, we count many success

stories from our students and teachers.

## **A Progress Report**

After the passage of the Massachusetts Ed Tech Bond Bill last fall, we were selected as one of the 25 school districts to receive financial support--\$30 a student. We also have been selected as one of 13 Lighthouse grant school districts, which means we will be sharing our new developments with other educators throughout the state.

We feel the systems have made enormous progress in three and a-half years and we are prepared to continue our campaign to maintain the edge we have achieved. We believe that we have far more support from the community than when I arrived, partly because of the efforts of the President and Vice-President of the United States, partly because of our business partners, partly because of our own educational efforts, and partly because of what has been happening statewide in Massachusetts.

Three years ago, I suggested to the Acton Area Chamber of Commerce School Business Partnership Committee that it urge and support all the agencies in town to connect to the network through the school's server. Today a number of the non-technology businesses use email partly as a result of our influence. Now students and parents sometimes have better access to the Internet from home than they do from school.

The world has changed so quickly and made it easier for us to argue for technology. But the question of financing technology in schools will always be a challenge. We know that we cannot stop the work of integrating, updating, and expanding our technology capacity. The kind of energy which we have expended will need to continue in order to benefit our students for their future.

Isa Kaftal Zimmerman is the Superintendent of the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District in Massachusetts.

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NSN's Winning Stories on School-Community Partnerships through Telecommunications

NSN is pleased to announce the winners in our Call for Stories Competition, all of which demonstrate that schools and their communities can draw closer through

educational technologies. Each winning entry earned a \$500 prize.

The stories cover a range of activities--from the Acton-Boxborough school system's patient and methodical approach to gaining town approval and funding; to the travels of the CyberEd truck throughout the United States to introduce new technologies to communities, their children, parents, and teachers; to the 90th birthday celebration of the Randall Elementary School in Madison, Wisconsin, courtesy of the efforts by its students on the Internet; to a host of projects where students worked together with seniors, in places like Chandler, Arizona; Waterbury, Vermont; and Mukwonago, Wisconsin.

The following are the winning entries and their authors:

[Making History Real: Welcome to La Center](#)

Kathy Plamondon, 5th Grade Teacher  
La Center Intermediate School, La Center, Washington

[Randall Elementary School History: Collaborating with the Community](#) Susan Birkenmeir, 5th Grade Teacher  
Randall Elementary School, Madison, Wisconsin

[Linking with Legislators: A Story of School-Community Involvement](#) Ann Walser, 4th Grade Teacher  
Shorewood Elementary School, Madison, Wisconsin

[Spectacle Island and the Big Dig: 'Something that Really Matters'](#) Diane Eisner, English Teacher, and Rick Thibeault, Science Teacher  
Clarke Middle School, Lexington, Massachusetts

[The Nederland JASON Project: Creating Partnerships](#) Randy Sachter, 6th Grade Teacher  
Nederland Elementary School, Boulder Valley, Colorado

[Pre-Columbian Art Collection Interactive CD](#) Gene Bias, Technology Services  
Orange County Public Schools, Orlando, Florida

[From Seventeen to Seventy--Electronically](#) Joe Greenwald, English Teacher  
Champlain Valley Union High School, Waterbury, Vermont

[Senior Citizen Internet Biographies: Bridging Generations](#) Jeradi A. Cohen, Instructional Technology Specialist  
Albemarle County Schools, Charlottesville, Virginia

[Project E-Mail: Linking the Generations](#) Dan Yatzeck, 10th Grade Student  
Kettle Moraine High School, Wales, Wisconsin

[First Grade Cross Generational Writing Project](#) Rikki L. Hayes, 1st Grade

TeacherGoodman Elementary School, Chandler, Arizona

[OHS Black River Design: An Experience in Technology](#) Bonnie D. Bonifield, 12th Grade Student  
Onaway High School, Onaway, Michigan

[Indian Creek's Electronic Bulletin Board: A Community Link](#) Dr. Jane Anderson, Principal, and Judy Morrow, System Operator  
Indian Creek Elementary School, Topeka, Kansas

**[A Primer for Getting Community Support](#) Isa Kaftal Zimmerman, Superintendent  
Acton-Boxborough Regional School District, Massachusetts**

[The CyberEd Tour: Taking the Internet on the Road](#) Karen Smith, Executive Director  
TECH CORPS, Sudbury, Massachusetts

[Starting at the Beginning: Linking Early Childhood Educators](#) Bonnie Blagojevic, Director  
The Sharing Place, Orono, Maine