Iowa Academic Chief Plays Dual Role

When the district's chief technology and chief academic officers are the same person, bureaucracy is not an issue

By Jaclyn Zubrzycki

Matt Townsley was several months into developing a teacher-leadership program aimed at helping teachers in Iowa's Solon Community school district reflect on and improve their practice when he learned about Swivl cameras.

The devices could attach to teachers' tablets or phones and help capture best practices It seemed like the cameras might help teachers analyze their lessons and learn from one another, so Townsley ordered four. Within weeks, instructional coaches in the district were trying out the devices with interested teachers.

In this 1,500-student district between Cedar Rapids and Iowa City, there's typically little delay when someone has an idea about how technology might help improve academics. That's because the district's chief academic officer and chief technology officer are one and the same. And that person is Townsley.

A former math teacher, Townsley has held the director of instruction and technology position in Solon for six years.

While larger school systems must navigate complex dynamics as they blend their districts' technology and academic departments, smaller ones such as Solon are increasingly finding administrators like Townsley who can handle both roles, said Kecia Ray, the director of the California-based market research firm Center for Digital Education.

That may be an advantage. In districts where academic and technology departments are in the early stages of working together, Ray said, building solid relationships can be difficult. Academic leaders may be evaluated based on measures of student achievement, while technology leaders may have historically been focused on practical essentials like making sure the district's network does not crash.

"That's not a problem if you're one and the same," Ray said.

In Solon, "I'm the one that sets the budget, who sets the policy for both technology and instruction," Townsley said. "I didn't have to ask someone else, 'Is the Swivl going to be compatible with our network?' I can make that happen."

Solon Community School District

- Location: Solon, Iowa
- School System Size: 1,500 Students

Having both roles is "a little dictator-like," he said. "But it's nice."

A Logical Connection

Townsley has spent his entire career in Solon, which has three schools. He taught high school math before his current role.

That trajectory is not uncommon in smaller districts, said Ray, who previously was the first executive director of learning technology in Metropolitan Nashville public schools. Especially in rural districts, a chief academic or technology officer is likely to be a teacher who has a liking for technology, she said.

"Folks in those positions often came out of the classroom and are now morphed into these positions because they have an affinity for technology or academics," Ray said. But, she said, not all small districts have teachers with the expertise in instruction, curriculum, and technology. "You've got to get really lucky."

Townsley checks on a MacBook Air cart at Lakeview Elementary School in Solon. Like many chief academic or technology officers, he was a teacher before taking on his district role.

—Mike Bradley for Education Week

That was true in Solon. Around the time Sam Miller was hired as superintendent in 2010, "we were looking for someone to really oversee teaching and learning with students. And we also had a need for more leadership with technology and how we were trying to integrate that into the learning process," said Miller, who left in 2015. "We had a person to do both."

Coordinating technology and academics, Miller said, is increasingly a necessity for school systems. "Students don't view learning and tech separately," he said. "Technology is like

their binder—it's just part of the process of learning. So the idea of treating tech, teaching, and learning separately is very antiquated, in my opinion. It needs to be embedded in everything we're doing."

With Townsley in the role, Miller said, "we're making sure this is our vision, to embrace technology and the learning process."

Miller is now the chief administrator of Area Education Agency 267 in Cedar Falls, which provides special education and school improvement support for districts in 18 Iowa counties. He is in the midst of restructuring the 600-person agency so that technology staff report to academic staff. "It needs to be seamless," he said.

Solon's current superintendent has embraced the same vision. "Technology is not a curriculum," said Davis Eidahl, who took over the district last summer. "It's a tool to enhance the curriculum to better engage students and to access more information and resources. Having an individual who is grounded in curriculum and instruction overseeing the technology component, you can see how they complement each other."

Small-District Changes

The Center for Digital Education's Ray said that small districts can adopt new technology with a nimbleness that is near impossible in big-city districts. "They can take an initiative and have it up and running quickly," she said.

Many smaller school systems are also rural districts, which are often faced with challenges such as introducing or providing technology to students who don't have Internet access or digital devices at home, Ray said. Technology directors in those districts are often striving to provide up-to-date, useful devices on a tight budget, and, for them, combining the instructional and technology roles into one may be an economic necessity.

Those issues are not as pressing in Solon, a bedroom community for Iowa City located near several universities. Solon has among the lowest percentage of students eligible for free- and reduced-price lunch, a common measure of a district's socioeconomic makeup, of any district in Iowa—just 8 percent.

The district opted not to use financial resources to adopt a 1-to-1 device program—increasingly common in Iowa—in part because its students already have their own devices. Former Superintendent Miller said that the school system was also wary of programs that introduced devices without reflecting on their academic benefits.

Instead, Townsley has focused on other pieces of the district's technology system, including doubling the amount of bandwidth, crafting a social-media policy that has since been adopted by other Iowa districts, and transforming the library into a technological resource and meeting place for students.

Some of the district's professional development now takes place through online communities. Teachers all receive a new laptop every three years. And Townsley led the district's transition to using Google's classroom applications.

Dawn Posekany, a high school biology teacher in the district, said Townsley frequently modeled for teachers how to use technology in the classroom. "He'll show little things that you can take back to your classroom the same day or the same week," she said. Posekany said that she left professional-development sessions feeling as though she had accomplished something.

"He's been in the trenches with us," she said. "Even though he's become an administrator, I knew I was going to be comfortable talking with him."

Standards-Based Grading

At a time when both technology and academics have been changing rapidly, Townsley has had to garner trust from both community members and teachers. Iowa introduced the

Iowa Core, based on the Common Core State Standards, in 2010. And in 2012, Solon became the first district in the state to adopt standards-based grading, an approach that tracks students' knowledge of the state standards. Townsley was already an early implementer: He led a study group on assessment and grading while he was still a teacher.
The introduction of the new system has not been uncontroversial, though. Some teachers were more prepared than others to take up the new system, which involves moving away from more traditional approaches like deducting points for lateness or completing homework and toward assigning grades based entirely on mastery of concepts.
Some parents and students were concerned about how the new grading system would affect grade point averages and college admissions.
The switch also presented some technological challenges. For instance, existing software programs for grading did not quite fit the grading system. But as a small district with little leverage, it's harder to promote changes in technology from larger companies, Townsley said.
But Miller said that technology allowed the district to more efficiently communicate how standards-based grading works. "Tech played an integral role because we were able to use videos to communicate to students, staff, and parents," he said. Having computers and technology in the classroom also helps teachers differentiate lessons more easily, he said, enabling individual students to focus on the standards they needed work on.
Now, several years into that initiative, Townsley said the district has fully embraced standards-based grading. These days, he's focused on new initiatives, such as the new video cameras. Just a few teachers had tried them out by early March, but Posekany said she planned to use one in her biology class.
Townsley said he is hopeful the district's teachers will embrace the idea. "If they're excited, word's going to spread."

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