

The 7 pillars of today's digital leadership

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School and district leadership isn't about a position or title—it's about improving practices around digital learning

If educators want to see results in student engagement and achievement, they must adapt their leadership practices to an increasingly digitally-focused learning environment.

This was the focus of a CoSN 2016 spotlight session by Eric Sheninger, a senior fellow at the International Center for Leadership in Education and a former high school principal.

"Leadership is not about position, titles, or power. Leadership is about the actions you take," he said.

During the session, Sheninger highlighted seven pillars of effective digital school leaders and talked about how, during his time as a high school principal, he and his staff modeled each pillar. Those pillars focus on how school leaders can ensure that their policies and practices highlight the best examples of digital learning success in schools.

"The environment in which kids learn is dramatically different," he said. "We fault our kids for being so engaged with technology...how can we prepare kids for the future if we, those tasked with educating kids, are stuck in the past? If teaching, learning, and leadership don't change, we're never going to get results."

Pillar 1: Student learning and engagement

"Technology is a tool—it's not a learning outcome," Sheninger said. "What do you want in your vision? What do you want your kids to be able to do with technology that will allow them to demonstrate conceptual mastery?" Engagement can begin with creating projects and learning opportunities that mean something. "If you don't get instructional design right, technology is just going to speed up the rate of failure. It's about building a foundation."

Pillar 2: School environment

When he was principal of New Jersey's New Milford High School, Sheninger said a change in learning spaces changed student engagement for the better. In fact, he said, data indicates the learning environment design can impact student engagement and achievement by up to 25 percent.

Pillar 3: Professional learning and growth

An unlimited number of professional learning opportunities are available on social media and through professional learning networks (PLNs), Sheninger said. Modeling the practices educators want to see from students is the first step.

Pillar 4: Communications

Communication has changed drastically because of technology, Sheninger said, and now educators are in an era of mass dialogue. “Don’t we want to take advantage of that in our own leadership capacity?” he asked. School stakeholders want news about school events, staff and student accomplishments, and district successes. “It’s about being proactive, not reactive,” he said. “Digital leadership is not just about information; it’s about meeting your stakeholders where they are.”

Sheninger also advised using multiple methods of news distribution, because people use various social media channels and communication methods. “You can’t put all your eggs in the Twitter basket or the Facebook basket,” he said.

Pillar 5: Public relations

“If you don’t tell your story, someone else will,” he said. “You need to tell stakeholders what actually happens in your schools and in your district. There are great stories to share—leverage the media.” Digital leadership is about becoming a storyteller-in-chief and sharing school accomplishments. Sheninger advised pushing out good news and accomplishments in various forms—news stories, photos, etc.—across various social media channels.

Pillar 6: Branding

Branding is a combination of your vision, mission, and values. “In education, a brand is not about selling. It’s about sharing, telling, and building relationships,” he said. A school brand should convey student achievement, teacher and administrator quality, extracurriculars, innovation, and partnerships.

Pillar 7: Opportunity

Digital leaders should consistently look for opportunities to improve existing programs, strategies, and resources.

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