



Conquering Cyberphobia, One Staffer at a Time

Continuous learning and ongoing technical support have proven to be the cure for techno-phobes

BY CAROL PATTON

When Dr. Jim Phares joined Marion County Schools in 2003 as superintendent, he was a bit disappointed that most of the district's administrators, principals and teachers were hardly using any technology to streamline their daily tasks.

The preK-12 school district based in Fairmont, West Virginia, supports 20 schools, three learning centers and approximately 8,300

students. Before Dr. Phares arrived, the West Virginia state department of education (DOE) received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and invited every principal throughout the state to attend computer training and receive a free laptop. However, he says between 10 and 15 percent of the principals in his district never showed because they didn't see a need for such training or the technology. What's more, some principals were also dragging their feet

applying for a variety of technology grants. The signs of cyberphobia were unmistakable.

So one of his first challenges was to help everyone get up to speed. "I made it an administrative goal and an expectation in their evaluation process," he says of his decision to purchase Palm handheld units. "We subtly pushed them along in order to get them more adept at using the Palm handheld on a day-to-day basis."

His persistence paid off. Just



three years later he says each of the district's principals and roughly half of its 700 teachers now use Palm handhelds in a variety of ways. Principals rely on it to do everything from conducting teacher evaluations to sending important documents or messages to faculty and other administrators (see accompanying sidebar). Teachers use it for classroom management and to help deliver instruction. Within five years, Dr. Phares expects the Palm to be used by 100

percent of the district's professional staff.

Starting from Scratch

Transforming tech-phobic employees into tech-savvy employees took teamwork. Dr. Phares and Tom Deadrick, the district's assistant superintendent, joined forces and began the conversion process by using the district's own dollars to conduct a series of technology workshops for those dozen or so principals who were either new to

the district or never attended the DOE's workshop. But this time around, attendance was mandatory.

The workshops offered training on how to operate a laptop, the Palm Treo smartphone and software programs like ePrincipal, eWalk and popular Microsoft applications that are compatible with the handheld smartphone. It didn't take long before enthusiasm for the Palm handhelds took hold, especially when the administrators began to understand how the tech-



Scrap-Paperless Schools

As part of The Bill and Melinda Gates Grant for Administrators, the EdVenture Group and the WVDE consulted with other educators to develop customized software for the Palm handhelds as an option that could be utilized by principals to conduct teacher evaluations.

"We made sure the program was an exact replica of their pen-and-paper evaluation form that consisted of a checklist, questions and a rating system," explains Donna Hoylman Peduto, director of K-12 Initiatives at EdVenture, a professional development and training firm in Morgantown. "It also had a comment library that they could use to enter commonly-used phrases when evaluating teachers."

Each principal was asked to bring real evaluation forms with them to a two-day workshop so they could download them as part of their training experience. Peduto, who was one of the trainers, explains that this approach helped participants immediately recognize the technology's value and increased their comfort level. Instead of carrying pen and paper, writing their observations and comments, then converting the copy to computer text, they could carry their Palm handheld in their pocket to each classroom, tap on a handful of keys, synch the information to their computer network and print out a hard copy when needed.

What's more, she says they could beam information like meeting agendas to teachers from anywhere on campus, store useful documents like teacher schedules, share their data with other administrators with increased speed and eliminate all of those scrap pieces of paper cluttering their desk.

"Some thought the Palm handheld was the way to make their school paperless and to model 21st century leadership skills with their teachers," says Peduto. "Others thought it was a symbol of digital literacy. But everybody was thrilled with it because it was so easy to use and saved so much time." ■

nology could help them simplify routine job tasks.

"We were active participants in the training so they knew this wasn't going away," says Dr. Phares, adding that he and Deadrick also served as very visible role models for the technology. "Some pick up on it very quickly. Others

take more time in order to learn. We've been very cognizant of that and as long as somebody is making progress and continuing to get training, we stay with them."

But Dr. Phares had a different plan for the district's top administrators. Initially, they carried a Palm Zire 71 and a cell phone.

Then they switched to a Blackberry but Dr. Phares continued searching for one electronic device that would do it all — enable administrators to send and receive e-mail, access the Internet, store documents and files, interface with a computer, use Microsoft applications and send and receive phone calls.

The result: this year, every central office administrator will carry the Palm Treo smartphone, which includes the Palm operating system and combines the functions of a cell phone with a Palm handheld. Next year, he expects that every principal will have one. "We're only carrying one device now, which has increased our efficiency," he says. "When we're not in the office, we can still work on the same [projects] as when we are in the office."

Classroom Applications

So far, the district's high school teachers have mainly used the Palm handheld. But that will change next year. A handful of elementary schools and middle schools have received enough grant money to offer each teacher a handheld and conduct a series of technology workshops.

Meanwhile, the Palm handheld computer has made a comfortable home for itself in the district's high school science and English classes. Last summer, high school science teachers received Palm handhelds and data probes or sensors by Vernier that are typically used in chemistry and physics classes to collect and analyze data. The probes connect to the Palm handheld device, enabling students or teachers to use them inside the classroom or out in the field. Stu-



dents can leave the building to collect data, then return to their classroom to synch the Palm handheld to a PC. The data are automatically loaded into a variety of computer programs while still connected to the probes.

Through other grants, some English high school and middle school teachers are also using a product described as “a portable writing box.” “Instead of disrupting their entire class by moving students to a computer lab for just word processing, students use the product, which also connects to a PC and the Internet,” says Deadrick. “The portable devices can actually

accomplish the same tasks as a PC.”

Other teachers are using the Palm handhelds to enhance their personal productivity. Some are using it as a gradebook with help from GradeQuick software, so they can track state standards, skills, assessments, lesson plans and record attendance, display statistics and student data fields and better manage online parent communication.

Much of the information stored on their handheld is synched with the school’s computer network. Then it’s uploaded into the state’s administrative system, which maintains student records and prints out essential documents like student report cards.

Still, although some teachers have embraced their new role as technology leaders, others are still hesitant, Dr. Phares notes. “When you have a lot of folks who have been trained as gatekeepers, taking these next steps into the future can be difficult for some,” he says. “We overcome this barrier by implementing a fairly comprehensive professional staff development program that targets two areas — using the technology for high yield instructional strategies and to enhance differentiation of instruction.”

But fear comes in many different shapes and sizes. There are some who still envision all sorts of horrors, such as the technology

Picture Perfect

Teachers at Marion County Schools in West Virginia have discovered a creative way for students at all grade levels to enhance their writing and communication skills or solve complex math and science equations.

With help from a Palm handheld and a drawing program called Sketchy, teachers are not only asking students to write stories, personal essays or poems but to also illustrate them, says Sally Morgan, a technology integration specialist at the district. They can draw anything from stick figures of their pets or family members to very sophisticated images of their favorite car or vacation spot in nearly any color.

After they finish their writing assignment, she says they can synch their drawings to the classroom PC, then print them out, convert them into a PowerPoint presentation or project them onto a screen as they tell their story in front of the class. In some cases, they also beam their project to the teacher's or other students' handhelds.

Likewise, science and math teachers confirm the technology is an effective learning tool. Morgan, a former science teacher, recalls how her students used the Palm handheld device to explain the results of science experiments.

"Sometimes, in a lab situation, it was hard for my students to describe in words what was happening," she says, explaining that it was often difficult for them to describe bacteria and other organisms observed under microscopes. "So I had them use the Palm computing device to draw what they saw."

The technology is being used across all subjects. Students in social studies or geography classes use it to draw maps with points of interest while it helps math students visualize answers to difficult math problems or formulas.

"You draw on the screen like you would a sheet of paper," explains Morgan. "It adds fun and depth to almost any assignment." ■

crashing, the loss of all their data or simply that the product is too complicated to learn. The essential factor, he says, is that teachers have now become facilitators of knowledge instead of gatekeepers of information.

However, as the number of district employees using the Palm handhelds and software grows, there are still other challenges, such as maintaining the equipment and employing knowledgeable staff who can trouble-shoot problems

over the phone or in the field, says Deadrick. "These issues constantly come up," he says, adding that the district currently supports two integration specialists who possess a high level of knowledge about

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the Palm computing devices and have trained others on how to use it. "Next year, we'll have three individuals in the county dedicated to working with administrators and teachers on how to better integrate the use of technology within various content areas."

In the meantime, the district was one of only 10 counties throughout West Virginia where every one of its schools met adequate yearly progress. Dr. Phares credits this major accomplishment to the advancements the district has made in technology and its strong impact in the classroom.

"We've used the Palm [handhelds] to take the lead in the use of technology in West Virginia," he says. "We've set the stage for the 21st century skills program in blending technology into every day instructional classroom life." ■