

The Role of the School Business Manager in Technology Planning

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Every individual associated with a school or school district is of vital importance to the process of technology planning. Certain people at the central administration level, however, have acutely crucial roles to play when the district is making plans to infuse technology pragmatically into instructional and administrative operations. One administrator often overlooked in the technology planning process is the school business manager.

The school business manager (SBM) deals, on a daily basis, with a majority of the aspects common to integration of technologies into instruction. The SBM sees buildings, curriculum, personnel, utilities, grants, equipment, resources, and travel as just a few of the ingredients in the smorgasbord of normal operations. These aspects are some of the identical critical issues considered by technology planners. Due to the similarity in efforts, it makes perfect sense that the SBM would be involved heavily in planning for sensible integration of technology for instruction.

When the technology planning committee for a district is formed, the committee chair should ensure that the school business manager is included. Mere input from the SBM could prove invaluable at critical times, so he/she must be named to the committee and given complete information on the litany of items the committee will consider. Furthermore, this individual, probably, could chair one of the subcommittees to deal with financial, physical, or coordination issues.

Peculiar capabilities of the school business manager are very beneficial to the school district. Likewise, the technology planning committee can take advantage of these characteristics. The SBM has an obligation, both professionally and personally, to ensure that students' welfare is preserved through the administrative and instructional processes. The SBM has an important role to play in several key areas.

Personnel

Some individuals might think that the school business manager has no place in the personnel arena. To many, the SBM deals with financial affairs only. Due to the fact that personnel are so crucial to operation of the school, it makes perfect sense to incorporate the thinking of the SBM in decisions that affect personnel. This is especially true when considering personnel who are involved with technology functions.

The school business manager who is effective will interact with technology faculty and staff regularly. Because of this, the SBM may provide input to the superintendent and school board with regard to the people they hire for specific technology-oriented jobs. Technologists, at this phase of instructional technology adoption in schools, are engaged in purchasing, maintaining, and upgrading large quantities of equipment. Technologists make recommendations about modifications to physical plant facilities so that various instructional technologies can be accommodated. A wide variety of funding sources are sought to support the spread of technologies. This multitude of common activities demonstrates the close relationship between the normal functions of the school business manager and his/her interaction with personnel involved with technologies.

Physical Plant

A multitude of decisions must be made about physical plant conditions, operations, specifications, renovation, consolidation, and liquidation on a continuing, regular basis. These decisions are extremely important because they affect every student, teacher, administrator, staff person, and even the community. The SBM, thus, must remain acutely aware of needs, interests, and concerns of patrons he/she serves.

Specific technology-oriented decisions with which the SBM must deal include electrical, ergonomic, networking, and mapping concerns. As microcomputers (and other technology devices, such as videodisc players, LCD panels, CD-ROM drives, and file servers) are plugged in to the school's electrical system, the current drain will increase certainly. Although an individual computer doesn't draw much current on its own, the cumulative effect of all the new technology devices can increase significantly the demand on wiring and electrical panels. Perhaps, if a school reaches a decision suddenly to network and install computers throughout an elementary school that was built in the 1950's, chances are extremely good that a complete electrical rewiring scheme will be necessary, as well. The SBM should be engaged fully in this process, because such important decisions require full knowledge and cooperation from the central office level.

As the SBM faces approval/disapproval decisions about placing technologies into students' environments, he/she must remember that new furniture will be required. In this case, an understanding of ergonomic requirements is essential. For example, the SBM must remember that seating arrangements at a computer terminal are often different from what the child needs for desk or table work. Many furniture and office supply firms offer specialized computer furniture designed to alleviate physical constraints facing the user. Decisions in this area become extremely difficult to reach when a school serves multiple ages and physical sizes of students in the same computing facilities.

Networking is an area that is changing rapidly. Networking, though, is becoming increasingly pervasive in schools, because this arrangement of devices allows for sharing of resources easily. While costs are falling in some areas of networking, new products and solutions are being developed regularly to solve problems and remove obstacles that existed earlier. The wise SBM will not try to learn all one can know about networking; rather, he/she would be well advised to

seek the assistance of an expert consultant with a proven record of networking school resources. The needs of a school are not identical to networking needs in the business world, so the consultant should understand the methodologies desired by educators for meaningful distribution and sharing of voice, video, and/or data within the school. Numerous reports and papers exist, too, that will help the SBM and his/her advisors to understand the successes of and pitfalls encountered by other educators who have attempted the same or similar task.

Funding

If the SBM has an expectation that all technology-infusion efforts must be funded from local coffers, he/she should spend some time examining the many opportunities available to schools through grant programs. Perhaps some money can be generated by external local sources; that is, business, civic groups, or clubs may have a significant interest in supporting the district's technology efforts. Grant proposals can be written, though, to numerous foundations and state or federal agencies that make a practice of providing money to worthwhile activities.

The Federal Register lists funding opportunities daily; every school district should be aware of and receive information regularly from the Federal Register. Perhaps the district has an officer carrying a title such as Federal Projects Coordinator—this person should be in possession of the very latest funding information from the federal government. Certainly, the SBM will seek the assistance of this officer, as well as knowledgeable individuals from a nearby university, in locating and preparing funding requests.

If the SBM, or anyone else associated with the district, has Internet connectivity or participates as a member of America Online, he/she can obtain up-to-the-minute information about funding opportunities. In addition, many experts operate forums designed specifically to address issues and opportunities through

grants. One such individual is Dr. Gary Carnow, who is the forum leader on the Scholastic Network. Dr. Carnow provides regular, consistent aid to educators who either are beginning the funding process or who encounter various obstacles during their pursuits.

Equipment Specifications

The school business manager must remain keenly aware of specification requirements for all purchases made by the district. It is particularly important, however, that he/she realizes the special nature of technology devices. For example, if one orders a microcomputer from a particular vendor, he/she may or may not receive a keyboard, monitor, or mouse. Specifications must be written completely. Often, as a matter of fact, it is a good idea to seek advice from another knowledgeable person prior to submitting specifications for bid or to ordering equipment.

Software is another area in which specifications are very important. If a teacher has been using a specific software application program, such as Print Shop, with the software loaded on individual machines, but he/she suddenly obtains a network, chances are extremely high that a different version of the software will be required. Such software is known, often, as “network-aware” software. Pricing from vendors will list regular software separately from networked software. To avoid costly mistakes, the SBM must realize this situation or depend upon experts in the area.

Obsolescence

Most technology devices have a finite life span. To assume that hardware will last indefinitely, and will work perfectly all that time, is sheer folly. Just as the hardware has a fixed period of utility, the same is true for buildings and other

physical facilities. The SBM must not only remain acutely aware of this fact, but he/she must extend this understanding into practices adopted by the district.

Historically, many educators have thought that when they bought computers, these things would just last forever. Hardly any thought at all was given to the reality that the machine might become obsolete in a fairly short time—even if the equipment worked perfectly for its entire life span. LeRoy Finkel, one of the premier pioneers in the field of educational technologies, stated that schools should adopt a three-year obsolescence cycle. On the surface, this might seem rather short; we can see, however, the rapid changes in technologies, coupled with remarkable improvements in software. If we do, in fact, desire that students are given the very best instructionally, we educators would be prudent to examine a fixed cycle time in which technology devices are to reach a terminal potential for the application being served at the time of purchase. Perhaps some equipment can be shuttled off to other applications; no sacrifices should be made in the quality of what students are expected to use in their learning activities. Certainly, then, the SBM has a quite significant role to play in this area, as he/she is directly involved in equipment purchase.

Coordination

An effective school business manager will not stay confined in his/her office all day every day. It stands to reason that many days may find the SBM “cooped up” for the entire day, but his/her perceived effectiveness will rise remarkably in proportion to the quantity of time spent traveling throughout the district visiting with teachers, staff, and administrators.

It is essential that teachers, the most direct deliverers of instruction (although we all realize the importance of a teachers’ being a “guide by the side” rather than the “sage on the stage”), feel that the SBM is in a helping role. When open

communications can take place among teachers, administrators, and the SBM regarding effective technology infusion into instruction and administration, much good will be accomplished. As the SBM indicates a perpetual openness to these candid discussions, those he/she serves will be more apt to offer help when the SBM needs it. Fewer disputes will arise over minutia associated with purchases and maintenance issues. In short, the SBM will have a much easier job.

In many instances, the SBM can be the key liaison individual between teachers who use the technologies and the top-level central administration. This is especially true in districts that do not have a technology coordinator. Mind you, no suggestion is made here that the SBM should assume the role of a technology coordinator! To the contrary, the relationship he/she enjoys with instructional faculty may lead to the hiring of a technology coordinator at some point in the future. Should this occur, all those concerned with the decision will be of a like mind. The SBM can carry messages of need, concern, and celebration from teachers to the superintendent—and vice versa.

Summary

Technology planning efforts at the school district level will be enhanced, with regard to quality, if the school business manager is involved. Even planners at the building level would be well-advised to include the SBM in major portions of their deliberations. By the same token, the SBM has a significant role to play by offering his/her services to technology planning efforts in the district.

Perhaps this nationwide renewal of interest in planning for technology integration, as it provides avenues for personnel at the local level to spend considerable quantities of time engaged in serious evaluation of their instructional delivery, will spawn new interest in providing and maintaining systematic coordination of efforts throughout all phases of school operation. Technology

planning will have brought together many school employees who, ordinarily, do not spend a great deal of time in mutual activities.

The broad scope of responsibilities and opportunities afforded the school business manager should cause all educators to refocus our attention on ways to incorporate these special talents into technology planning efforts. Administrator training institutions, too, face a renewed call to ensure proper and adequate preparation, technologically, for school business managers.

This article has not attempted to highlight all the roles played by a school business manager during the technology planning cycle. As a matter of fact, many specific roles will be evidenced depending upon conditions in individual school districts. This has been an attempt, however, to discuss crucial elements associated with many activities associated with the manager's roles. Good advice to the SBM who desires to operate with maximum effectiveness is to employ a healthy balance of common sense and the Golden Rule!