

CoSN / SIIA Feedback Forum:

What Does It Take For Innovative Ideas And Programs To Succeed?

Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) Conference– Washington, DC

March 2, 2010

Summary of Discussion

The need and interest in new and innovative ideas in education has never been greater. Initiatives like the Investing in Innovation (i3) fund and the Race to the Top grant encourage education leaders to develop innovative programs in hopes of raising U.S. standards and bringing the country back to the top in learning. Find out what educators have to say about:

- what innovations are needed over the next five years in classrooms and administrative offices to support personalized learning and the use of mobile devices, and to help students interact with teachers, each other, and the outside world,
- what those innovative programs look like in schools and the overall school system,
- what types of innovations are likely to succeed, and
- what it will take for them to scale up and bring real reform to education.

Education leaders participating in the forum:

- Jill Hobson – Director of Instructional Technology, Forsyth County Schools (GA), 35,000 students
- Ben Silvercliff – Director of Software Applications, TOIDES, 39 member districts, represents about 250,000 students.
- Tanna Kincaid – Director of Technology, Bismarck Public Schools (ND), 10,000 students
- Sean McDonough – Director of Information Technology, Harrisburg School District (PA), 9,000 students (serves with Randy and others on CoSN board)
- John Connolly – Technology Education Director, Chicago Public Schools, 420,000 students
- Dale Calcoffen – Assistant Supervisor of Curriculum Instruction, Chesterfield County (VA), 59,000 students
- David Holman – Chief Information Officer, Clarksville – Montgomery County Schools (TN), 29,000 students
- David Hotchkiss, Ph.D. – Chief Technology Officer, Fremont Unified School District (CA), 32,000 students
- Bill Morrison, Ed.D. – Director of Technology, Rapides Parish School Board (LA), 24,000

What things are you most excited about from an innovation standpoint in your own district?

Educators and CTO's (panelists) spoke about the new things they are trying to accomplish from both a curriculum standpoint and in developing programs to engage students through technology. One such example was a 21st century academy open 9 – 9 which would be used

as a center for online learning, and also as a student center where kids can come in and develop a plan of action with someone.

Other technology innovations discussed included online gaming software that is both dynamic and adaptive, as well as software options for innovation such as LMS (Learning Management Systems). One of the main concerns expressed by panelists was the limitations of available software; they want adaptive and personalized programs that do not currently exist. There was a general consensus that technology is moving in the right direction, but is probably still a few years away.

The topic of technological equity was also brought up in that some students cannot afford the technology; addressing this can put them on a level playing field. One district started a netbooks checkout program in all secondary libraries which was only open to students from socioeconomically depressed backgrounds. As a result, grades improved in participating schools and students were reportedly in less trouble. One principal told the story of a student who was constantly having disciplinary issues, yet made a complete change through this program.

While there are many ways that school districts can use technology in innovative ways, both the content and the technology still have limitations. The main goal for most districts is to involve students more, especially the at-risk or underperforming students, who can be effectively helped using technology. One panelist stressed a more open approach to using technology brought in by teachers and students by supporting a solid security and management system, which would allow innovation based on what students and teachers are comfortable with.

At what level is the innovation and development starting at classroom, school, district or state?

Most innovation and development starts at the state level, but actually boils down to the classroom level. One panelist, who worked at the state level, remarked that he could have a good idea of where certain initiatives were going, but as someone who experiences both levels could not see a statewide initiative being implemented effectively. There was general concern expressed over the disconnect between what the students and teachers need and how the state could effectively personalize innovation to those needs.

Some other panelists mentioned that because students are increasingly more tech-savvy than their teachers, technological development should really depend on what students are most comfortable working with. However, at some level policy often presents a roadblock to being able to use devices like a Nintendo Wii or a smart phone. For example, Bill Morrison pointed out that in his state, LA, laws prevent teachers from having any kind of digital communication with a student in the classroom.

The general consensus is that there needs to be more flexibility from a policy standpoint in order for innovation and development to happen effectively. There is also a liability issue,

but there needs to be a way to work around that when someone says “this really works.” Sean McDonough, a panelist from PA, brought up his district’s use of a “Connected Learning” community in which students could use social media in a controlled “walled garden” environment only within the school network. That way, students can work with today’s technology and then collaborate amongst themselves and with teachers.

Will districts benefit from programs and initiatives like Race to the Top and I3?

General concern is that although some of these programs require participation of underperforming districts, the scope of their need is not covered by initiatives. A lot of states are telling underperforming districts to “do this, and sign here,” which is not what they need. The data that states are using in order to target problems and underperforming areas for drastic reform is very limited. State leaders are not very willing to recognize working innovations and to work at the district level to build and grow; until this unwillingness is remedied, those programs will not be effective.

Q&A exchange with the education leaders:

What systems do you have in place to evaluate innovation and are these working?

Use a “balance scorecard” for strategic planning in order to have a process to evaluate innovative approaches. Can fill out an application online that can be assessed by experts as far as how it can be implemented, price gap, etc. Another panelist uses innovative grants to evaluate and encourage innovation.

How big of a problem is drop-out rates prevention and retention, and how do you use technology to address this?

General consensus is that technology plays a large role in combating this problem, making sure students are engaged as well as able to participate (for instance, pregnant students). The main concern is that there are certain demographics that are much more at risk than others. To address this issue, schools have set up programs that are technology centered and allow students to accelerate their learning at their own pace.

Is anyone using, or will be using, school improvement grants to fund innovation?

One panelist uses them as a starting point to create the student learning hubs in the connected learning communities. Educators see students learning hubs as ways to first interest students who are not engaged because of issues outside of school, and then to address the issues of learning and personalization after getting “through” to the student.

How many of you are allowing student owned devices (mobile devices, etc.)?

General consensus is that the panelists are using them selectively. Some are working towards it but still need to protect the network; others are encouraging it. It is more of an issue at the principal or teacher level, since some still see it as a distraction.

Are there examples of global collaboration?

In Harrisburg School District, the 1st graders are collaborating with UK students and the 3rd graders are collaborating with students in Hong Kong. This began as a general, pen-pal curriculum piece, but they are doing more science-related projects sporadically throughout the curriculum, which are mostly teacher led. The Beijing Olympics “Domino” project had schools from around the world set up and synchronize dominos. This was not so much academically focused as audiovisual, but sparked a lot of communication and conferencing around the world.

Much of innovation in classroom tech is coming from consumer technology; is consumer technology dominant?

The issue is seat time requirements in order to test the effectiveness of an innovative program; for example, the YouTube teacher who teaches math is being used all across the country by teachers because the video is effective. The classroom teacher is often behind on these innovations, so there needs to be a focus on professional development. Consumer-level devices are harder to support because they need to have resources available for a longer time, and new products come out too quickly to keep buying updates and compatible resources.

Note: The SIIA Education Division, CoSN, and the Winter Group have co-hosted leadership Feedback Forums at education technology conferences since 2003. These Feedback Forums are designed to enable school leaders to frame challenges they are facing and discuss key education technology issues in a focus group setting. Each forum has a specific focus of interest and concern to the K-12 education community as well as to SIIA-member education technology companies and to CoSN Corporate members. The Forums are held in partnership with The Winter Group and are open to SIIA and CoSN members.