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ABSTRACT

For the past 5 years at Boonsboro Middle School in Washington County, Maryland, a full-time lab coordinator has been responsible for all aspects of running the school's computer facilities. In a survey conducted at the end of the current school year, students, teachers, administrators, and district-level supervisors had the opportunity to evaluate the lab's success and the lab coordinator's effectiveness. Their written comments revealed the importance of the coordinator as mentor (to students), as role model (to teachers), and as strategist (to administrators and supervisors). (Author)

Promoting Secondary School Computer Use? A Coordinator is the Key

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ABSTRACT

For the past five years at Boonsboro Middle School in Washington County, Maryland, a full-time lab coordinator has been responsible for all aspects of running the school's computer facilities. In a survey conducted at the end of the current school year, students, teachers, administrators, and district-level supervisors had the opportunity to evaluate the lab's success and the lab coordinator's effectiveness. Their written comments revealed the importance of the coordinator as mentor (to students), as role model (to teachers), and as strategist (to administrators and supervisors).

INTRODUCTION

The presence of a computer lab in a school does not necessarily imply frequent and enthusiastic computer use by teachers and students. Some teachers claim not to have the time to prepare to add a component to their already packed curriculum requirements. Other teachers don't see a logical place for computers in their curricula. Still other teachers just don't want to get involved with intimidating hardware. To combat these attitudes, a school needs at least one person to act as a catalyst for computer use.

At Boonsboro Middle School in Washington County, Maryland, the

full-time computer coordinator is responsible for hardware and software maintenance, word processing and keyboarding instruction, computer-related inservice activities, and support services for faculty and students. The position has existed in the school for five years, having been created in the fall of 1985 when a grant provided the school with a classroom lab of thirty-two computers operating with a local area network.

SURVEY RESULTS

A survey conducted at the end of the current school year had student, teachers, administrators, and district-level supervisors evaluate the lab's success and the lab coordinator's effectiveness. Respondents included 119 students representing grades six, seven, and eight (20% of the total school population), thirty teachers (of thirty-three), and four administrators (two building-level, two district-level).

Student responses. When asked how the coordinator helped them in the computer lab, students listed her technical role during assignments. Thirty-four students (28%) described how she gave directions for getting in and out of programs in the network's menu system. Thirty-six (30%) described her help with problems when students had difficulty with the functions in a particular program or with their computer hardware. Twenty-two students (18%) mentioned that the coordinator taught them keyboarding skills and how to use the computers. Eighteen students (15%) indicated that the coordinator was "helpful" or that she "answers my questions". Five students (4%) responded that they didn't need help in the lab, and ten students (8%) did not respond to the question.

When asked what more the coordinator could do to help, most students (n=60, 50%) responded that she seemed to be doing all she could or that there was nothing more they could think of for her to do. A number of students requested that she allow them to play more games on the computers (n=6, 5%), while others wanted to be able to use the lab more frequently (n=5, 4%). The remaining responses were quite personal and varied from requests to let students chew gum in the lab (n=6, 5%), to allow students to choose their own seats (n=7, 6%), and to have the coordinator type their reports for them (n=2, 1.6%)!

Finally, students were asked if they thought the lab would change if there were no coordinator. Ninety-one percent of students (n=109) anticipated some degree of chaos as indicated by their comments:

"it would be a disaster"

"papers would be everywhere"

"the computers would lock & no one could unlock them"

"we would get a contagious computer virus"

"there wouldn't be a computer lab any more"

"people would ruin the computers & destroy the fun"

"there will be broken stuff, gum all over the place"

"people inept with the computers would have no help"

Faculty responses. Teachers were asked 1) how the coordinator contributed to their effective use of the computer lab, 2) how the coordinator could become more effective, 3) whether the coordinator should be present in the lab with classes at all times, 4) if lab use would change without a coordinator, and 5) whether teachers

should know more about lab operations so a coordinator is not necessary. The table below summarized their responses:

Ques. #	Responses	Freq. (%)
1	troubleshooting hardware/software	7 (23%)
	instruction (of teachers/students)	8 (27%)
	scheduling classes	6 (20%)
2	no response	21 (70%)
	does all she can now	3 (10%)
	more of current services (see #1)	5 (17%)
3	yes-expert help; troubleshooting, etc.	18 (60%)
	no- beginning/end of classes only, when using new software	9 (30%)
	no response	3 (10%)

4	yes-would use only familiar software, would use lab less often, would not use lab at all	21	(70%)
	no- someone should be available to troubleshoot, however	9	(30%)
5	yes-using network menu system, doing minor troubleshooting	13	(43%)
	no- too much to do already, coordinator necessary	11	(37%)
	no response	6	(20%)

Administrator responses. Four building- and district-level administrators answered the same questions about the lab coordinator's role as the BMS faculty did. Their responses to question 1 mirrored those of the faculty (see table, above). Their suggestions for additional contributions (question 2) included grant writing, more community-centered activities after hours in the lab, and more technical training for the coordinator.

For question 3, two administrators agreed that the coordinator should be available at all times to lab users; two indicated that a coordinator should be present depending on the needs of lab users. For question 4, three administrators agreed that lab use would decline and that the instructional program would suffer as a result. One indicated that technical problems would probably close that lab within two weeks. Finally, three of four administrators agreed that teachers can always use more computer inservice activities, but those activities should not be as technical as that required for a coordinator. One administrator explained that

expecting teachers to share responsibility for the lab's operation would be too much to ask.

CONCLUSIONS

The lab coordinator's role in a networked computer lab using a variety of software packages is a critical one. Her technical responsibilities encompass a variety of tasks which should not be expected from a classroom teacher with a full schedule. The student respondents in this survey seemed to realize the differences between their teachers' instructional role and the coordinator's technical role in the lab. They anticipated varied degrees of computer disasters without the coordinator present. They viewed her as their mentor for computer use.

Teacher respondents realized the coordinator's technical expertise; they expressed reluctance to acquire such expertise themselves in addition to their instructional responsibilities. Her frequent presence in the lab with classes provided teachers with a role model for effective uses of computers for instruction.

While administrators could not guarantee the position to continue indefinitely, they recognized the lab coordinator as a strategist for developing, organizing, and conducting instructional activities for faculty and students. They identified her position as an important one which successfully promotes computer use.