

Examining Digital Innovation in K-12 Schools: Variances Related to Identified School Typologies

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The challenges facing the United States in educating its youth have been widely documented. The dropout rate in the past decades has been staggering, with students of color and in lower socio-economic circumstances posting an even higher rate. However, educators are now beginning to embrace the promise of ubiquitous digital technologies in the classroom. This study examines the practice of adopting mobile devices in K-12 environments in a geographic region of the Midwestern United States. Typologies of the participating school districts (N=96) are used to drill down to patterns of mobile technology integration, online/blended learning opportunities and other digital innovation strategies to compare the educational environments of rural/suburban/urban districts. The findings suggest that active learning environments, addressing personalized needs and providing evidence of student competencies, may be accomplished effectively by integrating mobile technologies more prominently in K-12 classrooms.

Keywords: innovation, mobile technologies, K-12 schools, digital divide, assessment

INTRODUCTION

The challenges facing the United States in educating its youth have been widely documented. The dropout rate in the past decades has been staggering, with students of color and in lower socio-economic circumstances posting an even higher rate (Barton, 2005). Perhaps more troubling are the indicators that students who are staying in school until high school graduation are largely disengaged and disenfranchised with their experiences (Balfanz et al., 2007; Henry et al., 2012). Finally, emphasis on standardized tests, that may or may not be relevant in determining how successful or productive students will be in our information-age world, has created an ambiance of confusion and stress for both teachers and students (Au, 2011; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Sahlberg, 2008). So, despite the significant investment of time and money in public education for all of United

States young people, in an effort to promote productivity and democracy, the results appear to be dismal.

But there are signs that major changes are coming to our educational institutions, changes that will drastically alter the traditional models that have long held across the years and have, for the most part, been resistant to promising models of reform. These changes are largely fueled by the reality of the digital world we now live in. Since the advent of the World Wide Web (circa 1995), the digital generation and exchange of information has become the norm. In the past decade, the interconnectivity and collaborative possibilities in the use, reuse, and co-construction of digital texts, images, audio, video, and databases (loosely identified as “Web 2.0” functionalities) has forced teachers to abandon their long-held positions as the ultimate possessors and distributors of knowledge. (Barnett, 2012; Drexler, 2010; Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010) Students come to school knowing that the “information is in the air” (Williams, Karousou, & Mackness, 2011) and that they have the ability to connect with experts around the world in multiple venues, in order to learn about all sorts of content, academic or practical.

Beyond the amount of resources available for learner consumption, in the support of educational growth, our digital tools now afford us the communicative and data-management power to truly provide individualized learning experiences for students. The United States Department of Education (US DoE) is supporting the Digital Promise initiative, using their League of Innovative Schools as a conduit to encourage implementations of powerful technologies to support meaningful learning. The US DoE’s Office of Educational Technology is promoting strategies including one-to-one mobile devices for students, personalized learning networks, a national registry of learning resources, data management learning dashboards and competency-based education models to provide direction for dramatic changes in our nation’s schools. (Hwang, Kuo, Yin, & Chuang, 2010; Miller & Lake, 2012; Wang & Liao, 2011). However, school district and community resources continue to impact a school’s ability to effectively implement meaningful technologies. These resources are typically based upon a district’s typology based upon location, poverty, and enrollment. Kincheloe (2010) indicates that urban districts often have higher poverty rates; greater racial, ethnic, and language diversity; and higher rates of student mobility—all of which creates a culture that may impede innovation.

So how are schools adapting to this new realization that they must embrace the educational possibilities of the digital age? This mixed methods concurrent study sought to determine what regional K-12 schools in a Midwestern state were doing, as a result of these forces. In addition, the relationship between digital innovation adoption and the typology of the various schools responding was examined. Specific questions addressed in the study include:

1. What types of initiatives, related to the Digital Promise of DoE’s Office of Educational Technology, are schools in this region exploring or deploying?
2. Does the degree of digital innovation adoption differ by district typology?
3. What are the identified priorities of these schools, specifically related to student learning outcomes?

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study were school administrators of K-12 schools within a 50-mile radius of the research institution. Ninety-six school principals chose to participate in the study, following an email explanation and invitation. Administrators were informed

that they could pass the survey completion task on to another teacher/administrator of their choice, and that they would receive a follow up phone call in upcoming weeks, in order to acquire their responses, in the event that the online survey was not completed. As a perk for completing the 5-minute survey, principals were offered a complimentary registration to a full-day technology symposium being hosted at the university in the spring. Fifty-six administrators accepted this offer and attended the event later in the year.

INSTRUMENT

In order to address the research questions, an online survey (See Appendix A) was developed by and distributed through the Office of the Center of Excellence for 21st Century Educator Preparation of Bowling Green State University. After demographic/contact information, the instrument asked participants to rate their involvement with eleven innovations (BYOD, one-to-one mobile devices, flipped classroom, etc.) using a 3-point response scale of: 1=Not Familiar, 2=Exploring, and 3=Deploying. Following this section, two open-ended questions posed were:

1. What other initiatives (not mentioned above) are you investigating or implementing to support student learning?
2. What are your highest priorities, connected to student learning, for your school/district at this time?

PROCEDURE AND DATA COLLECTION

The survey was sent to principals of all schools within a 50-mile radius of the center with an email requesting completion of the online survey, or an option to complete the survey over the phone. Out of the school principals contacted, 96 completed the entire survey. This response rate represented a reasonable sampling of the schools in the region with 4 charter schools and 17 private schools in addition to 86 public schools in the response set. Surveys were not anonymous, but were confidential, as far as keeping individual responses from being distributed. Principals supplied their school names, addresses and an email contact, so that researchers might follow up on specific responses from their schools, and data was aggregated and shared back to the districts for comparison and conversation. This type of protocol was utilized to support a more open and collegial model of working towards meaningful change, grounded in the philosophy of the Open Source and Open Education mindsets. After survey data were organized in a spreadsheet, district typology was identified for each participating school. The Ohio Department of Education has identified eight district typologies based upon location, degree of poverty, and enrollment. Table 1 presents the typologies for the 86 public schools. Private and Charter schools were assigned to a ninth category.

Table 1. State's Typology Descriptors (Public Schools Participants n=86)

2013 Code	Full Typology Descriptor	Enrollment (ADM)	Median Income	Student Poverty	Percent Minority	# of OH Districts	Sample <i>f</i>
1	Rural - High Student Poverty & Small Student Population	1,366	\$29,161	47%	4%	124	3
2	Rural - Average Student Poverty & Very Small Student Population	1,032	\$32,486	36%	3%	107	17
3	Small Town - Low Student Poverty & Small Student Population	1,676	\$34,507	30%	5%	111	16
4	Small Town - High Student Poverty &	2,230	\$27,713	51%	14%	89	16

	Average Student Population						
5	Suburban - Low Student Poverty & Average Student Population	4,176	\$37,567	28%	16%	77	11
6	Suburban - Very Low Student Poverty & Large Student Population	5,254	\$53,233	12%	13%	46	2
7	Urban - High Student Poverty & Average Student Population	4,608	\$26,283	64%	45%	47	8
8	Urban - Very High Student Poverty & Very Large Student Population	30,647	\$24,716	84%	70%	8	13

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized to address Research Questions 1 and 2. Since Research Question 3 explores the qualitative data from the open ended survey items, constant comparative analysis of utilized. Results are presented by research question.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

Participating schools responded to a variety of technology initiatives by indicating: 1=Not Familiar, 2=Exploring, and 3=Deploying. Technology initiatives included BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) or one-to-one mobile devices for students. If they were exploring or deploying this initiative in their school, they provided details, as to the type of devices they were supporting (laptops, tablets, handhelds). In addition, adoption of digital textbooks (in lieu of paper texts), flipped classroom models, incorporation of blended or online course options, the use of online assessment tools, a focus on individualized or differentiated instruction, and the alignment of their work with the Partnership for 21st Century Skills were included in the survey prompt. Table 2 presents the frequency of responses for each initiative as well as the mean and standard deviation.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics for Initiative Implementation**

Initiatives	<i>n</i>	<i>f</i>			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
		(1) Not Familiar	(2) Exploring	(3) Deploying		
BYOD (Bring Your Own Device)	90	20	40	30	2.11	0.74
One-to-One Mobile Devices for Students (identify below)	91	13	52	26	2.14	0.64
Laptops	77	6	30	41	2.45	0.64
Tablets (iPads, etc.)	86	10	35	41	2.38	0.68
Handhelds (iPods, cell phones)	68	12	29	27	2.22	0.73
Digital Textbooks	90	18	52	20	2.02	0.65

Flipped Classrooms	88	32	40	16	1.82	0.72
Online or Blended Classes	92	24	42	26	2.02	0.74
Online Assessment Tools	103	9	36	58	2.48	0.65
Individualized/Differentiated	99	3	30	68	2.64	0.54
P21 (Partnership for 21st Century Skills) Alignment	87	32	38	17	1.83	0.73

*Note: This item was slightly problematic, in that responders should have been offered the choice Neither Exploring or Deploying. In the survey, other than “not familiar,” responders were inherently forced to choose some sort of allegiance to the initiative, as exploring or deploying. It is possible that they could have been familiar with the initiative, but not interested in exploring or deploying it. However, responders could have chosen not to select a response.

Initiatives with the highest implementation (highest frequency of deployment and highest mean) were: Individualized/Differentiated Instruction ($M=2.64$), Online Assessment Tools ($M=2.48$), One-to-One Laptops ($M=2.45$), One-to-One Tablets ($M=2.38$), One-to-One Handhelds ($M=2.22$). Initiatives with the lowest implementation were: Flipped Classrooms ($M=1.82$) and P21 (Partnership for 21st Century Skills) Alignment ($M=1.83$).

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

Initiative implementation was examined by district typology using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Scheffe’s post hoc tests. Prior to this analysis, five schools were excluded from analysis due to their typologies having very low frequencies—an assumption violation for ANOVA. Only three schools identified as (1) Rural - High Student Poverty & Small Student Population; only two schools identified as (6) Suburban - Very Low Student Poverty & Large Student Population. Table 3 presents typology group means for each initiative as well as the ANOVA results. Groups means reveal that Urban-Very High Poverty Schools reported the lowest implementation means for seven of the eleven initiatives. In contrast, group highs were spread across a variety of typologies. Significant typology differences were found in three of the initiatives (BYOD, one-to-one laptops, and online/blended instruction). The Urban-Very High Poverty schools responded significantly lower implementation than the other districts.

Table 3. Means and F-ratios for Initiative Implementation by District Typology

	Private <i>n</i> =17	Rural Average to High Poverty <i>n</i> =16	Small Town Low Poverty <i>n</i> =13	Small Town High Poverty <i>n</i> =16	Suburban Low Poverty <i>n</i> =11	Urban High Poverty <i>n</i> =7	Urban - Very High Poverty <i>n</i> =10	<i>F</i>
BYOD	1.88	2.63	2.00	2.25	2.09	2.14	1.60	2.79*
One-to-One Laptops	2.26	2.25	2.40	1.86	2.00	2.00	2.00	1.27
	2.50	2.79	2.62	2.42	2.56	2.00	1.90	2.86*

Tablets	2.44	2.15	2.62	2.50	2.50	2.14	1.90	1.65
Handhelds	2.20	2.20	2.50	2.25	2.20	2.14	2.00	0.38
Digital Texts	1.88	2.06	2.08	1.93	2.17	2.14	2.00	0.33
Flipped	1.64	2.00	2.08	1.94	1.83	1.57	1.40	1.40
Online/Blended	2.06	2.20	2.21	2.38	1.75	1.57	1.55	2.63*
Online Assessment	2.53	2.47	2.50	2.31	2.58	2.38	2.54	0.28
Individualized/Differentiated	2.47	2.61	2.69	2.75	2.75	2.63	2.62	0.51
P21	1.89	1.54	1.91	2.00	1.92	1.75	1.67	0.62

Note: * $p < .05$.

Effect sizes using eta squared were calculated for the significant results: BYOD ($\eta^2 = .13$), one-to-one laptops ($\eta^2 = .16$), and online/blended ($\eta^2 = .11$). Large effect sizes were noted for BYOD and one-to-one laptops with district typology accounting for 13% of variance in BYOD implementation and 16% of the variance in one-to-one laptop implementation. District typology generated a moderate effect size for online/blended learning implementation as typology accounts for 11% of variance. Since a one-to-one laptop program is likely the most difficult and most expensive innovation to implement among those surveyed, district typology is a reasonable explanatory variable.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3

Participants were posed two open-ended items that elicited responses regarding other initiatives being explored or deployed and school/district priorities. The qualitative results of the open-ended response items provided more descriptive details as to the actions and priorities of the school districts.

Other Initiatives. Sixty-four participants indicated “other initiatives” being implemented. However, many participants ($n=26$) elaborated on their technology initiatives, further discussing their one-to-one programs. Sixteen of these 26 schools spoke of technology in relation to other initiatives, such that the technology was a means to fulfilling other goals. Three “other initiatives” emerged from the data: 1) state-wide initiatives; 2) curriculum changes; and 3) meeting the needs of all students. The theme of statewide initiatives was the focus for 13 respondents and included the topics of Ohio Teacher Evaluation System, Race to the Top, Formative Instructional Practices, and the Third Grade Reading Guarantee. Many mentioned the PARCC (Herman & Linn, 2013) assessments specifically and the challenge of administering these assessments online in upcoming years. Curricular initiatives were also identified by many respondents ($n=10$), as many discussed Common Core, the new Ohio Academic content standards, STEM, project-based learning, and curriculum mapping. Finally, equally important was the emphasis on meeting the needs of all learners. Many school leaders ($n=10$) identified initiatives that addressed interventions, enrichment, credit-recovery, ESL support, individualized instruction. The desire to have students and teachers perform well, as gauged by these state standards, assessments, and value-added parameters was paramount among approximately 20% of the responses submitted in this area. The following quote is representative of the comments received:

Our focus has been directed at improving scores in the state mandated assessments. (OAA < OGT). We are also preparing for new statewide, end-of-course exams that will be implemented in the next few years. The development of new learning standards, formative assessments, and preparation for online assessments (PARCC) is also a priority. The implementation of Ohio's New Learning Standards (Common Core State Standards, Ohio Revised Standards), technology integration included in curriculum maps, measuring student growth, and evaluation are all connected in this plan.

Priorities. When asked about their school's highest priority related to student learning, 95 educational leaders responded, with 33 indicated technology as a top priority, followed by student achievement. Other priorities echoed the initiatives identified in the previous question. Along with their commitment to the standards and legislated assessments, principals espoused a strong allegiance to innovation, personalized learning experiences for students and 21st century skills. They spoke of "giving our staff the tools for learning that allow them to teach our students the way the students are learning with their personal devices at home while all the while maintaining the high standard of excellence that we demand from both staff and students." The commitment to connect the curriculum to student success beyond the classroom was evident in the explanations associated with the one-to-one deployments, which were mentioned in detail, providing the names of the devices (Chromebooks, iPads, laptops, BYOD, cell phones, etc.). One school leader stated, "Our priority is that students will learn the curriculum necessary to be successful in life. We are preparing students for the future. We want to make sure our students are receiving the best education possible with the best tools that are available."

In other words, school principals connected one-to-one deployment initiatives to providing more personalized learning environment for students. One commented that, "We want to see more individualized strategies, one-on-one teaching time...we want to spend more time making learning relational, but also use higher level thinking skills." Another said, "We want to raise the rigor of our instruction in order to prepare our students better for life after high school. We are implementing a more challenging curriculum, and we need to do more with lesson planning and assessing learning objectives." Finally, a principal described their broader vision, explaining,

Regarding student learning, our focus is on creating/maintaining student centered classrooms that foster and promote creativity, communication, and collaboration. Instructional goals should always include relevance; students should utilize 21st century learning skills to solve real world problems. Learning best takes place during the application of knowledge to accomplish real work.

These statements provide context for the infusion of the digital technologies in these schools. A context that connects curriculum and standards to meaningful, personalized learning. Of course, not all comments were as lofty and promising, as one principal noted, "...but we also need to work on getting more use of technology by our teachers in their instruction. We have gone to BYOD, but our students have indicated they see no value in bringing such devices to school because they can't use them in the classroom." This observation ties in to multiple comments related to professional development for teachers, and these will be unpacked and addressed in another article, as they are currently beyond the scope of this piece.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

While research is lacking that identifies the initiatives that schools are implementing, the literature regarding educational initiatives focuses on state and national policies and guides. These results show that school leaders are exploring or implementing a variety of initiatives that are parallel to state legislation and policy. However, when comparing the initiatives being implemented with the typology of the school districts employing the implementations, it is apparent that the “digital divide” still prevails. Urban districts continue to struggle (Kincheloe, 2010). Along with their commitment to the standards and legislated assessments, principals in wealthier districts espoused a strong allegiance to innovation, personalized learning experiences for students and 21st century skills. They spoke of “giving our staff the tools for learning that allow them to teach our students the way the students are learning with their personal devices at home while all the while maintaining the high standard of excellence that we demand from both staff and students.” The commitment to connect the curriculum to student success beyond the classroom was evident in the explanations associated with the one-to-one deployments, which were mentioned in detail, providing the names of the devices (Chromebooks, iPads, laptops, BYOD, cell phones, etc.). Again, these specific initiatives were noted in districts with higher SES student populations. One school leader stated, “Our priority is that students will learn the curriculum necessary to be successful in life. We are preparing students for the future. We want to make sure our students are receiving the best education possible with the best tools that are available.”

School leaders connected one-to-one deployment initiatives to providing more personalized learning environments for students and ultimately increasing student success. One commented that, “We want to see more individualized strategies, one-on-one teaching time...we want to spend more time making learning relational, but also use higher level thinking skills.” Another said, “We want to raise the rigor of our instruction in order to prepare our students better for life after high school. We are implementing a more challenging curriculum, and we need to do more with lesson planning and assessing learning objectives.” Finally, a principal described their broader vision, explaining,

Regarding student learning, our focus is on creating/maintaining student centered classrooms that foster and promote creativity, communication, and collaboration. Instructional goals should always include relevance; students should utilize 21st century learning skills to solve real world problems. Learning best takes place during the application of knowledge to accomplish real work.

These statements provide context for the infusion of the digital technologies in these schools, and, also, a stark contrast to those schools in the lower SES typologies. Providing a context that connects curriculum and standards to meaningful, personalized learning should be the goal of all schools, not just those schools in higher SES regions.

Of course, not all comments were as lofty and promising, as one principal noted, “...but we also need to work on getting more use of technology by our teachers in their instruction. We have gone to BYOD, but our students have indicated they see no value in bringing such devices to school because they can't use them in the classroom.” This observation ties in to multiple comments related to professional development for teachers, and these will be unpacked and addressed in another article, as they are currently beyond the scope of this piece.

Results have implications for teacher preservice and in-service training. With 78% of participating schools exploring or deploying one-to-one technology initiatives, teachers need training on instructional methods that capitalize on a one-to-one learning environment

while meeting the needs of all learners. While most teacher preparation programs include technology integration courses and experiences, preservice teachers are likely receiving inadequate preparation to teach within a one-to-one classroom. Teacher education courses need to address the instructional ramifications of a one-to-one environment as well as blended and online environments (Yoon & Chang, 2012). In addition, teacher candidates need to be equipped with strategies to fully utilize digital technologies for personalized learning experiences for students, regardless of the type of school.

While it is apparent that school leaders are working to accommodate the legislative demands of the national Common Core curriculum, online PARCC achievement testing and value-added criteria for teachers, they are doing so with an eye towards preparing students for a future outside these parameters and restraints. Implementing one-to-one mobile device initiatives, while providing an infrastructure for online testing (PARCC) and access to other state and national assessment systems, creates opportunities for teachers and students to individualize, customize and differentiate instruction for students. Teachers continue to need professional development, not only to learn more about how to integrate the digital tools and resources being provided in their schools, but to “retool” as educators that facilitate personalized learning environments for all of their students. The interconnected, communicative, responsive, data-rich world in which we live now makes this possible. Pursuing this ideal with equity is our current challenge.

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APPENDIX

SCHOOL SURVEY

We are currently trying to get a better idea of the initiatives being deployed in Ohio schools, so that we can prepare new teachers to step into these environments. Towards this end, I need your help in sharing some information about your school/district’s current and future practices. Thanks for completing this short, online survey.

Savilla Banister, Director, Center of Excellence for 21st Century Educator Preparation, BGSU

School Name

School Address

Key School Contact’s Name (survey responder)

Key School Contact’s Email

Please Indicate the Initiatives that your school is either deploying or exploring

	Not Familiar	Exploring (talking about implementation)	Deploying (Actually doing)
BYOD (Bring Your Own Device)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
One-to-One Mobile Devices for Students- (Identify below)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
o Laptops	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
o Tablets (iPads, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

o Handhelds (iPods, cell phones, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Digital Textbooks (online academic resources)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Flipped Classrooms	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Online or Blended classes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Online assessment tools	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Individualized/Differentiated Instruction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
P 21 (Partnership for 21st Century Skills) Alignment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What other initiatives (not mentioned above) are you investigating or implementing to support student learning?

What are your highest priorities, connected to student learning, for your school/district at this time?