

Host Your Own Ed Tech Conference



With careful planning and a few money-saving tips, you can host your own ed tech conference for a fraction of the cost of sending your district staff elsewhere, and encourage collaboration in the process.

Veteran sixth grade teacher Maureen Bratke received a new teaching assignment for the upcoming school year: teaching in a one-to-one laptop classroom. She started to get nervous as she thought about re-creating all of her lessons and struggling to answer endless technology questions from her students.

Luckily, her district had her covered. Walled Lake Consolidated Schools, a public school district in southeastern Michigan serving more than 15,000 students, has hosted an annual educational technology conference called Spice It Up! every August for the past six years. We modeled our one-day mini-event after the ISTE annual conference and exposition as well as that of our local ISTE affiliate, the Michigan Association for Computer Users in Learning (MACUL). At Spice It Up! Walled Lake teachers are both the presenters and the attendees, and they have a shared goal of moving the district forward and ensuring that our teachers and administrators understand why staff and students must have access to and use technology every day.

Teachers Teaching Teachers

When Spice It Up! began in 2005, the sessions were more tool focused, but it has since evolved to emphasize how technology can support the curriculum in ways that motivate students and save time for teachers.

At last year's conference, Bratke attended one of 50 breakout sessions taught by her colleagues to learn about using digital storytelling as an instructional strategy in her social studies classroom. Although she was still hesitant about tackling such a technology-intensive project come September, the ideas, teaching materials, and sample lessons she received at the conference bolstered her confidence.

"Having this conference before school starts allows me to begin the year with fresh and innovative learning activities that will engage students in meaningful and relevant ways," she says. "I like that classroom teachers present proven ideas and lessons they have used with great success in their classroom with students."

The conference, which draws more than 300 teachers and administrators, works because teachers are teaching teachers. The presenters share the technology tools they know and demonstrate how they've integrated them into their daily classroom activities. In this way, the conference makes the most of the knowledge that's already embedded in the district, saving a lot of money and creating a culture of collaboration along the way.

The results speak for themselves. Technology is already part of Walled Lake's culture, thanks to a supportive school board and administration, innovative teachers, and a community that expects technology use in the schools. But the conference has provided the extra motivation and instruction that many Walled Lake teachers needed to incorporate new tools into their classrooms. Seeing what other educators at their grade level or building level are doing gives many the courage to try those lessons with their students. (See "Proof Positive," page 21.)

For example, second grade teacher Jennifer Phillips attended Barbara Ozminkowski's session on blogging in the elementary classroom three years ago. Since then, all of Phillips' second graders have blogged weekly and published their work from Writer's Workshop on the blog.

And because both the presenters and attendees are colleagues who live near each other, it is easy for the collaboration to continue after the conference is over. We have seen a ripple

effect as teachers informally share the technology-infused lessons and ideas they learned at the conference with other colleagues. Phillips, for one, shared her newly acquired knowledge about blogging with a fellow second grade teacher at her school, and as a result, three more classes of students are learning to blog. What's more, sharing curricular goals and objectives during the conference sessions provides an avenue for collaborative dialogue throughout the school year. For instance, even though they are at different schools, Phillips and Ozminkowski have become active members of each other's personal learning communities as they continue to share the latest on new software and widgets as well as student success stories in the blogosphere.

At first, many potential presenters do not see themselves as teacher leaders, so they need gentle encouragement to realize that they indeed have the skills, strategies, and courage to share glimpses of their classroom practices with their colleagues. The conference environment is relaxed, and attendees offer appreciation for the time and effort the presenters invest in preparing and communicating their experiences. As a result, the presenters become more confident and tend to continue to share their positive experiences using technology to enrich meaningful learning experiences for students in their schools, communities, state, and beyond.

Kerry Muncy first attended the conference to collect ideas for her math and English classes. Three years later, she and Bratke shared their experiences using digital storytelling with other teachers at the conference. Muncy and Bratke have since become technology leaders as a result of this opportunity to share their instructional practices with other adult learners.

Conference Planning Timeline

January: Establish the date for the conference. Ask the district and all schools within it to avoid offering other staff development that day.

February: Send a “save the date” e-mail to all staff. Solicit volunteers to present sessions.

March/April: Categorize proposed session topics according to the NETS for teachers and administrators. Identify standards and general session topics that still need to be covered and solicit recommendations for presenters of needed topics from media specialists, computer resource teachers, and building principals to fill any gaps.

June: Invite the superintendent and encourage school board members to attend.

July: Presenters submit information about their sessions for the conference brochure. (They appreciate that the deadline falls after school is out so they have more time to plan.) Create a schedule of sessions organized by strands.

Early August: Publish the conference brochure on the district’s website. E-mail the brochure to all staff.

Two days before conference: Post signs with topics and times on the doors of the classrooms where sessions will be held. Set up tables for distributing conference brochures and refreshments. Test and distribute equipment (multimedia projectors, speakers, etc.).

Late August: Have the conference! Immediately afterward, post an online survey for conference attendees. Solicit feedback from presenters by e-mail.

September: Analyze the results of the survey and debrief the conference. Share conference highlights and summarize comments at a board of education meeting. Publish an article about the conference in the district newsletter that is distributed to all district families.

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Planning the Program

Conference planning begins each year in January, and we start advertising for both volunteer presenters and attendees by February. (See “Conference Planning Timeline.”)

One thing we keep in mind is that an ed tech conference should not be only about teachers. We realized that, as instructional leaders, district and building administrators need the information and understanding to promote and encourage technology use in the classroom as well, so we explicitly invite them to participate.

David Barry, Walled Lake Central High School’s principal, presents a session for administrators. “This conference provides our district with an opportunity to showcase the potential and capacity of technology to improve and support student achievement,” he says.

Of course, administrators are busy people. But we discovered that their attendance at the session increased dramatically when we sent them a calendar invitation using the district e-mail system. They can accept, decline, or ignore the invitation, but if they accept, the conference is automatically added to their personal calendar. This strategy worked so well with administrators that we used it to invite all staff for this year’s conference. We have also found that sending regular and frequent conference reminders at meetings, by e-mail, and in staff newsletters in the months leading up to the conference helps boost attendance.

Each year, we select a keynote speaker, who attends either in person or virtually, to provide a purpose for the day and set the tone for learning. Previous keynote speakers—all of whom volunteer their time—include Steve Dembo of Discovery Education;

Bruce Umpstead, educational technology director of the Michigan Department of Education; and Leslie Wilson, president of the One-to-One Institute.

For the sessions, conference planners specifically seek topics that align with the NETS for Teachers (NETS•T) and NETS for Administrators (NETS•A). For example, high school social studies teacher Brian Blackney facilitated a session called Classroom Applications for Digital Storytelling at the Secondary Level to help teachers see the power of using digital storytelling as an assessment tool, based on the NETS•T recommendation that teachers design and develop digital age learning experiences and assessments.

We don’t ask attendees to preregister for sessions to avoid frustration over cancellations. Instead, we publish the conference schedule online in advance and suggest that participants try to arrive promptly to get a good seat.

During the lunch hour, 8–10 elementary, middle, and high school students join us in a panel discussion about how technology affects their lives at school and at home. According to feedback provided on a yearly online postconference survey, the student panel is a highlight for many attendees, who are sometimes shocked at the students’ candid answers.

One high school sophomore explained to a group of about 100 teachers and administrators her thoughts about multitasking:

A lot of teachers try to use laptops at school, but they stop because they think kids aren’t doing what they are supposed to be doing, and they get really angry about it. For example, if they catch a student checking their e-mail, they say we cannot use the computers anymore. But what a lot of teachers don’t realize is that it is helpful and productive for us to use e-mail and instant messaging to communicate with others about what we



Proof Positive

Every year we hear more stories about the impact our Spice It Up! conference has had on students and teachers across the district, reinforcing our dedication to continuing the effort. Here are just a few examples that make it all worthwhile:

Class blog. Barbara Ozminkowski uploads photos of the students and posts about what's happening in the classroom regularly to keep her kindergarten families and friends in the know. One parent said, "It's very much like being a fly on the wall, peeking in on daily learning experiences." Another parent added, "The pictures on the blog are very helpful in sparking conversations about school with my kindergartner."

Ozminkowski's kindergartners are bloggers too! By second semester, they learn how to log on to their own pages and write short entries. The students are motivated to write and publish to an outside audience and are eager to read comments

that visitors to the blog leave. When Ozminkowski shares these kinds of positive experiences and parent feedback with colleagues at the conference, they're more interested in starting their own classroom blogs.

Presentation tips. Renee Valentine learned the importance of including more images and less text-intensive bullet points in her electronic presentations at Shoemaker's Presentation Zen session. Recently, the math/science curriculum developer made an existing PowerPoint about differentiated instruction in the math classroom to make it more interactive and engaging.

"The way I create and present presentations is dramatically different since attending the session at Spice It Up!" she says. "Feedback from teachers has been positive; hopefully the new and improved presentations have a lasting impact on teachers and their classroom instruction."

Screencasting tools. Randall Micallef created content for MiLearning on iTunesU and shared his knowledge with others by offering a session on screencasting tools. "Attending the conference has taken away some of the intimidation associated with using new things or ideas in the classroom," says the eighth grade math teacher, who has been a participant and a presenter. "I am always looking for ways to incorporate technology in my classroom that the students will find interesting to use. At Spice It Up! I find something every year that I can instantly use in my classroom and that the kids always find fun."

Podcasting. Julie Stoughton has recorded science podcasts on a routine basis since learning about the tool at a session. Her seventh grade science students now listen to podcasts on her website to review for summative benchmark assessments. With study guides in hand and ears tuned to their MP3 players, the students listen to the teacher-recreate the various labs, concepts, and ideas they have learned throughout the unit. Hearing their teacher's voice helps them remember the content more vividly.

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are doing in class. A lot of teachers don't get that. We can do those two things at the same time.

The kids have positive things to say too. A high school junior expressed his appreciation for his teachers' willingness to spend time learning ways to incorporate technology into their lessons. "Our classrooms have been a great 21st-century learning experience," he says. "And the technology integration by my teachers allows me to learn in a more innovative way."

Conference on the Cheap

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Everyone knows that conferences are an investment. But at Walled Lake, we invest more in our time and less in money. Whereas a typical one-day conference hosted by a state organization costs about \$400 per person including travel and hotel expenses—not to mention \$100 for substitute teacher coverage if it's held during the school year—our costs break down to about \$15–\$20 per person. That means that holding the conference in district for about 300 people conceivably saves nearly \$150,000 in conference and substitute costs.

Our conference planners go to great lengths to keep costs as low as possible. Pamela Shoemaker, the district's instructional technology coordinator and conference co-chair, does most of the planning, scheduling, and recruiting of teacher presenters. Mark Hess, Shoemaker's co-chair and the principal of the middle school where the conference is held, plans and schedules the administrative strand. Teachers attending and presenting are compensated only with district-required professional development hours, and we secure the services of all keynote speakers, presenters, and IT support on an entirely volunteer basis.

Shoemaker has found most of our volunteer keynote speakers via her professional learning network (Twitter, Plurk, Ning) and professional organizations such as MACUL, the One-to-One Institute, and the Discovery Educator Network. For the 2010 conference, we were able to secure Title 2 funds to bring Kevin Honeycutt to Walled Lake, but that was the first time we spent any money to bring in a keynote speaker.

Because the conference happens one week before school begins, the building is already open, custodians and secretaries have started their school year, and the needed technology is ready to go and available. We encourage participants to bring their own laptops to sessions to reduce the need for technology support staff to organize and provide computers for all participants, and student technology interns help augment professional IT support.

The conference is also nearly paperless. We print about 100 conference brochures for those who don't bring a printed copy from the website, but attendees access any session handouts on the district's technology integration website. Participants appreciate the convenience of easy access to these electronic handouts, and we save at least \$1,000 in printing costs.

Finally, instead of catered meals, the school's PTSA uses the conference as an opportunity to organize a fundraiser to sell food and refreshments to attendees.

Of course, our district needs more than just a one-day conference to keep the innovative juices flowing. Schools must offer and encourage multiple types of learning opportunities, such as workshops, online courses and webinars, face-to-face collaborative work, and participation in professional networking. We need to remember that there is always more to do, more to learn, and more to achieve as the technology around us constantly changes and evolves. But we have found that our annual gathering provides just the inspiration we need to begin each school year in the mindset to do this.

Resources

Barbara Ozminkowski's Kinder Blog:

<http://tiny.cc/kinderblog>

Jennifer Phillips Second Grade Blog:

<http://tinyurl.com/PhillipsBloggers>

Spice It Up! Electronic Handouts:

www.wlcsd.org/Spice2010

Walled Lake 2010–13 Tech Plan:

www.wlcsd.org/techplan20092012

Walled Lake's Technology Integration website:

www.wlcsd.org/techintegration



The authors are colleagues in the Walled Lake Consolidated School District in southeast Michigan. Barbara Ozminkowski (back, left) is a kindergarten teacher and conference presenter. Pamela Shoemaker (back, middle) is an instructional technology coordinator and conference co-chair. Mark Hess (back, right) is a building principal and conference co-chair. Jennifer Phillips (front, left) is a second grade teacher and conference presenter. Lynn Dunn (front, right) is a middle school computer resource teacher and leads tech support for the conference.